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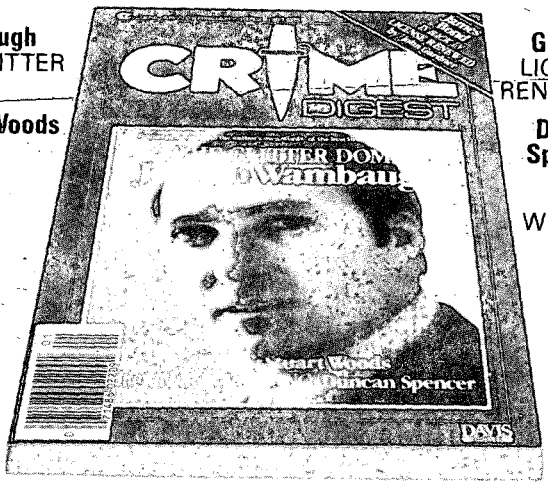

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THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN

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a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

The guest (or grillee) at this month's Black Widowers banquet is the curator of the City Museum of Ancient Art. The curator, Enrico Pavolini, believes there are secrets "not easily penetrated." Now, this is a challenge the Black Widowers cannot ignore—not while Henry the waiter is on duty . . .

THE PHOENICIAN BAUBLE

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Geoffrey Avalon, a patent lawyer by profession, did not often admit to reading light fiction. On the occasion of this particular Black Widowers banquet, however, he stirred the ice in his second drink (which had reached its halfway point and would be sipped no more) and said, "I read an interesting science-fiction story yesterday."

James Drake, a retired chemist, who had spent the better part of an otherwise misspent life in reading every kind of popular-fiction periodical, said, "Did it hurt?"

"Not at all. I was at a friend's place, saw a magazine, leafed through it, began reading, and, I must admit, rather enjoyed it. The premise was that to a man who had developed total recall there could be no secrets. If I were to recall *everything* you said, Jim, together with intonations and expressions, and combined it with what others said and what I already knew, I would be able to deduce everything about you. No matter what it was you didn't want me—or anyone—to know, you would give it away a dozen times a day without knowing it. It's only that in real life we pay no attention—or don't hear—or forget—that's why secrets remain secrets. In the

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story, of course, the protagonist gets into trouble with his wild talent."

"As they always do," said Drake, unimpressed. "It's a literary convention as old as Midas' golden touch. The story you read was, I suspect, 'Lest We Remember' by Isaac Asimov, in a recent issue of his own magazine."

"That's right," said Avalon.

Mario Gonzalo, who had arrived late and had just placed his rubbers and raincoat in the cloakroom (for New York was not really enjoying the rain it badly needed for its reservoirs), ordered his drink from Henry with a small gesture, and said, "Asimov? Isn't he Manny's friend, the one who's even more stuck on himself than Manny is, if you can believe it?"

Emmanuel Rubin turned his entire body to face Gonzalo and pointed his finger. "Asimov is *not* my friend. He merely dogs my footsteps because he needs help on various simple points of science before he can write his so-called stories."

"I looked him up in Books in Print, Manny," said Gonzalo, grinning, "He writes a lot more—"

"Books than I do," Rubin finished. "Yes, I know. That's because I don't sacrifice quality for quantity. Here, meet my guest. Mr. Enrico Pavolini. This is Mario Gonzalo, who represents himself to be an artist and who will disprove the fact by drawing a caricature of you shortly. Mr. Pavolini is curator at the City Museum of Ancient Art."

Pavolini bowed with Continental courtesy, and said, "I listen sadly to the science-fiction story you are discussing. I fear that even a perfect memory could not penetrate some secrets, except in romances. And always those secrets that badly need penetrating prove the most opaque." His English was perfect but his vowels had a subtle distortion to them that made it clear he was not born to the language.

Trumbull said, "My feeling is that most secrets are safe because no one really *cares*. Most so-called secrets are so damned dull that it is only those who are desperately bored who would take the trouble to ferret them out."

"That may be so in some cases, my dear sir—" began Pavolini, but was interrupted by Henry's quiet announcement that dinner was served. The guests sat down to an array of Greek appetizers that bore a promise of moussaka to come. Roger Halsted made a small sound of pleasure as he draped his napkin over his thighs, and

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Rubin, having speared a stuffed grape leaf, looked at it approvingly, placed it in his mouth, and ground it to nothingness.

Rubin then said (his mind clearly running on his earlier reference to quality versus quantity), "One of the unfortunate consequences of the era of pulp fiction, between 1920 and 1950, is that it raised a generation of Asimovs who learned to write without thought, in the pursuit of quantity only."

"That's not entirely bad," said Drake. "It's far more common for a writer to fall into the opposite trap of postponing execution in a useless search for non-existent perfection."

"I'm not talking about perfection," said Rubin. "I'm suggesting just a little extra trouble to move away from abysmal junk."

"If you'll *read* some of the better pulp, you'll find it is far away from abysmal junk," said Drake stiffly. "A lot of it, in fact, is recognized now as an important contribution to literature and its techniques are well worth study. Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Cornell Woolrich—Come on, Manny, it's your own field. Don't knock it."

"They weren't pulp. They were real writers who had to make use of the available markets—"

Drake laughed. "It's easy to prove that all pulp is bad if, when examples of the contrary are cited, you say, 'If it's good, it isn't pulp.' "

Gonzalo said, "Once something is old, it gets slavered over by critics who would slap it down hard if they were contemporaries of the object criticized. I've heard Manny say a hundred times that Shakespeare was a hack writer who was despised in his own day."

"For every Shakespeare," said Rubin, his sparse beard bristling, "who was far ahead of the puny minds of his time, there were a hundred, maybe a thousand, scribblers who were dismissed as zeroes in their own time and who are exactly zero today, if they are remembered at all."

"That's the point," said Pavolini. "Surely survival is the best testimony of worth."

"Not always," said Rubin, characteristically shifting ground at once. "Accident must play a role. Aeschylus and Sophocles wrote over ninety plays each, and in each case only seven survive. Who can possibly say those were the seven best? Sappho was considered by the ancient Greeks to be in a class with Homer himself, and yet virtually nothing of her work survives."

A curious silence fell over the Black Widowers, as though in ap-

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preciation of true tragedy—the loss of the irreplaceable work of human genius. The conversation became quieter and more general.

And finally, Rubin, as host, called for the grilling. "Not you, Mario," he said. "You'll try to prove you're an artist and bore Mr. Pavolini to death and he's too good a friend for me to lose. Jim, you do the honors."

Enrico Pavolini looked expectant. His smile, which seemed always radiant, gave every indication of welcoming all questions. He might have been in his fifties, but his neat mustache, his ungraying hair, his unlined face, his unsorrowing eyes, would have made the forties an equally reasonable guess.

Drake cleared his throat and said, "Mr. Pavolini, how do you justify your existence?"

Pavolini showed no surprise at all at the question. He said, "By doing what one man can do to prevent the tragedy of which we spoke earlier in the dinner. I labor to save those products of artistic genius that might otherwise be lost. In so doing, of course, I must often deal with thieves and criminals, and compound their felonies—but the nature of my work justifies even that."

Drake said, "Who are these thieves and criminals you speak of?"

"Throughout history," said Pavolini, "works of art have been hidden; sometimes purposely as when they are buried with dead rulers or aristocrats, or when they are concealed from marauding bands of armed men; sometimes accidentally as when a temple is destroyed by an earthquake or a ship sinks at sea. And throughout history there have been people in search of treasure, persistent robbers with spades who break into pyramids and tombs, who follow the legends of buried treasure, who poke about in sunken ships. Caches of coins, ingots of precious metals, collections of jewels and works of art, are always turning up.

"Sometimes they are broken up, melted down, sold as bullion or stones. Sometimes, especially in the last two hundred years, they are left intact and placed on the open market. That's where I, and others like me, come in. We bid for the material. Every museum of art in the world is filled with illegal loot."

Drake said, "What makes these so-called looters criminals? Are they supposed to leave works of art buried—the property of, for instance, a pharaoh who has been dead for thirty-five centuries."

"In the first place," said Pavolini, "many looters are criminals against humanity. They are ignorant people who may come across

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a treasure either by accident or design, but who, from the start, or in the end, are interested only in the negotiable. Everything they do not see as intrinsically valuable, they are liable to destroy, not so much out of malice as out of indifference. They are quite likely to break up priceless treasures in order to salvage a few emeralds or strips of gold.

"Secondly, they are criminals in the eyes of the law. Over the last century, nations have come increasingly to consider various relics of the past as part of their national heritage and therefore the property of the state. Searches should, in theory, be conducted under strict supervision, and discoveries should not be sold to foreign museums. Even trained archeologists who flout these rules are, strictly speaking, criminals.

"Still, many governments are too inefficient to conduct proper searches, too corrupt to resist bribery; and human cupidity is such that consideration of national pride can almost never compete with the fact that a better price can be obtained from foreigners."

Drake said, "If all museums combined in a policy of refusing to deal with looters—"

Pavolini shook his head vigorously. "It would do no good. The museums are run by human beings, or by governments, with their own prides, cupidities, and corruptibilities. No museum would want to lose a real find to another museum. And even if the museums were to stand firm as a group, items might be sold to private collections, or be broken up and melted down. Some looters have resorted to blackmail and have used the threat of destruction to force a higher price."

Drake said, "Is it all worth it? Surely not everything is a great work of art?"

"Some is," said Pavolini, smiling with a touch of condescension, "by any standards, as, for instance, the bust of Nefertiti, the Cretan snake-goddess, Venus de Milo. That, however, is secondary, in a way. Every artifact of a past era is important as a living evidence of a society that is gone. The commonest pot of terra cotta was once used, was part of a way of life, was formed to fill a purpose. Each is as important and as indispensable to an archeologist as the fossil tooth of an extinct shark would be to a paleontologist."

Trumbull said, "May I interpose, Jim? I presume the City Museum of Ancient Art has its share of past artifacts, Mr. Pavolini?"

Pavolini's smile broadened. "It certainly has, Mr. Trumbull. You must come and visit us some time and see for yourself. We are a

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comparatively young museum and do not have the resources of the Metropolitan, but we are more finely focused and our collection of pre-Columbian Mexican art is world-famous."

"I will certainly visit you at my first opportunity," said Trumbull, "but I seem to remember that before dinner you said something about secrets not being easily penetrated."

Pavolini looked suddenly grave. "Did I?"

"Yes. There was some mention of an idiotic science-fiction story about a perfect memory being all that was required to penetrate any secret and you said—"

"Ah, yes, I remember."

"Well, then, were you referring to anything specific, anything that had to do with your work?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Pavolini shrugged. "A small thing that has been haunting me for some time, but of no importance outside my own feelings, I suppose."

"Tell us about it," said Trumbull, conjugating himself abruptly into the imperative.

Pavolini blinked. "As I said, it's utterly unimportant."

Rubin put in gently, "Tell us anyway, Enrico. It's the price of the dinner. You remember I explained about the grilling."

"Yes, Emmanuel," said Pavolini, "but it is not a thing I can discuss indiscriminately. From a strictly legal standpoint—"

Rubin said, "We are all as silent as one of your pre-Columbian artifacts. That includes, particularly, our esteemed waiter and fellow-member, Henry. Please continue, Enrico."

Pavolini smiled ruefully. "Our artifacts are not by any means silent, since they speak to us eloquently of past cultures, so it was an unfortunate simile. However—There was a Phoenician bauble on the market of the museum world—the *black* market, I suppose.

"It had been dug up in Cyprus, where the confusion of the past decade has made it possible for looters to obtain and smuggle out valuable material. This was a small cup of gold and enamel, dating back to some time about 1200 B.C. There was some question as to whether it showed Mycenean influence and it bore promise of modifying some of our notions of events in the time of the Trojan war.

"Naturally we wanted it, and so, I imagine, did a dozen major museums in the world. It wasn't, of course, a matter of mere bidding. The person offering it for sale had to cover his tracks for he wanted to get back to Cyprus, to obtain other pieces perhaps, without being stripped of his gains and being thrown into prison by the Cypriot

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authorities. For that reason he needed to have certain precautions accepted, certain guaranties made. And, of course, it helped to have a good man on the spot, a persuasive man."

Rubin said, "You once told me about one of your people who you said was exactly like that—Jelinsky."

Pavolini nodded. "The name is not merely Jelinsky. You forget how it came about that I mentioned him to you in the first place. His full name was Emmanuel Jelinsky. That is actually how I came to know *you*, Emmanuel. It is not a common first name and when I was introduced to you, I thought at once of *my* Emmanuel. It drew my attention to you. We talked about him and then I had my chance to get to know you. *My* Emmanuel, however, is now dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Rubin.

"A heart attack. He was sixty-five and it was not entirely unexpected. But, if I may be permitted to view it selfishly, it was tragic, for with his death went all chance of obtaining the Phoenician bauble." Pavolini sighed heavily. "To be honest, it was with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded myself to attend the banquet tonight—but I had accepted your invitation nearly a month ago and my wife insisted I attend. She said she did not want me brooding about the house and tearing my hair. She said, 'Have one evening out. Forget.' So here I am, and I'm not forgetting after all."

There was an uneasy silence, then Gonzalo, the ever-hopeful, said, "Sometimes it turns out that we can help people with problems."

Trumbull said instantly, "*Will* you stop making ridiculous statements like that?"

"I said *sometimes*," said Gonzalo defensively, "and I intend to continue the grilling. How about it, Manny? You're the host."

Rubin looked uncomfortable. "Do you mind if we continue, Enrico?"

Pavolini managed a smile. "Not talking will not bring him back, nor the bauble, either."

"All right, then," said Gonzalo. "You said that Jelinsky's death lost you that Phoenician whatever-it-was. Which museum got it?"

"I wish one of them did. That would be better for the world generally. The trouble is that the object has simply disappeared."

"How? Why?" asked Trumbull.

Pavolini sighed. "Well, then, from the beginning. Let me explain about Jelinsky. He was with the museum longer than I was and he was simply invaluable. I don't wish to overdramatize but in some respects museums must engage in activities that have the atmos-

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phere of espionage work. There are delicate negotiations to be carried through, clandestine contacts to be made, objects to be purchased illegally and, therefore, secretly; there are other museums to spy on and measures to be taken to foil enemy spies.

"Of course, it is all small potatoes since the apparatuses involved and the stakes, too, are far smaller than those which governments or even industries are involved with. On the other hand, we don't have great power to fall back on for protection, and to us, at least, if to no one else, the stakes are high.

"Jelinsky was what we would consider a masterspy, if he were an employee of the C.I.A. He could trace valuable items and make his contacts before anyone else was fairly in the field. He was persuasive, could talk a bird out of a tree and into his hand, could close a deal to the greatest advantage of ourselves even while others were after the same item with offers that were double what we could pay. We never knew how he did it.

"I asked him once about that but he just let one eyelid close and said, 'You'll never know, Enrico. After all, if you ever fire me, I would have to find work elsewhere and it would be inconvenient then if you knew my methods.'

"He had one peculiarity, however, that we all knew about. It was impossible to miss. He doodled. He was never without a scratch pad and at any time that scratch pad had the top sheet covered with fascinating abstractions. They were never quite the same but they were always neatly geometric—triangles, squares, trapezoids, octagons, either alone or in bizarre combinations. Sometimes there would be words built up of letters neatly printed in geometric form. Sometimes I could tell it was a word that occupied his mind at the time of the doodling. I remember once, when we were in conference, he wrote the first few letters of my name, each letter constructed in a series of egg-shaped segments. I asked him if he would let me have it as a curio and he looked at it with astonishment as if he were not aware he had done it. He gave it to me with an air of wondering why I could possibly want it. I still have it.

"I asked him once why he doodled and he said he wasn't sure. He said, 'Maybe it is what I do instead of jiggling my feet or tapping my fingernails. I have a restless mind and this focuses it and keeps it from darting off in unwanted directions. Maybe. And maybe it just serves as an outlet for some artistic impulse that lies dormant in me. I don't know. In any case, I never notice that I'm doodling

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when I'm actually doing it. But at least I stick to geometry, so I never give away my thoughts."

" 'Except when you doodle letters,' I said, and he flushed and insisted they never meant anything."

Gonzalo said, with satisfaction, as he sipped his brandy and then held up the glass for Henry to renew the infusion, "I'll bet one of Jelinsky's doodles has a part in all this."

"Yes," said Pavolini sadly, "or I should not have gone on at such length about it. Obviously. Two weeks ago I received a call from Jelinsky. He was in Halifax. He did not speak of the Phoenician artifact directly for—and again I do not wish to overdramatize—he well knew his room might be bugged or his wire tapped. Some of our competitors are at least as unscrupulous as we ourselves are.

"I understood the significance of what he was saying, however. He had closed the deal and he had the object. Why the deal was closed in Halifax I don't know and didn't ask. The looter may have been Canadian or Jelinsky may have persuaded him to come to that unlikely city to throw off the scent as far as the others in the field were concerned. It didn't matter.

"Though Jelinsky had physical possession of the object, he did not intend to carry it with him to New York. He had checked it in an unobtrusive place in the form of a package that gave no outward clue to its contents or its value, and under conditions in which it was clear to the people keeping it that it might be some time before it was called for. He was coming to New York with the information and someone else would then fly to Halifax to get the object. All this was told me most indirectly, virtually in code."

"Isn't all this indirection overdone?" said Halsted.

"I know it sounds paranoid," said Pavolini, "but Jelinsky was a known man. He might be followed, his baggage might be tampered with. After all, why hesitate to steal an object that was already stolen? In any case, Jelinsky did not feel it safe to carry the object to New York. We could send some unknown to pick up the object, someone who would be safe *because* he was unknown."

"Except that Jelinsky died," said Gonzalo excitedly, "before he could pass on the necessary information."

"Of a heart attack, as I told you," said Pavolini, "at Kennedy airport. Naturally, he never had a chance to tell us where he had checked the object."

Avalon looked grave and said, "I scarcely wish to outdo you in overdramatizing the matter, so I will ask you to reassure us that

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there is no chance Jelinsky was murdered and the information taken from his body."

"Not at all possible," said Pavolini. "There were those who saw him collapse, there was his history of heart disease, and there was a careful autopsy. There was no question but that it was a natural death, and a most unfortunate one for us. For one thing, we had lost an irreplaceable man, but he would have died eventually. It was the precise moment of his death that was the calamity.

"We don't know where the object is. We presume it is somewhere in Halifax—but that is all. Essentially, the Phoenician bauble is once again buried, and it will be recovered only by accident and by—who can tell who.

"Even if it is found by someone and placed on the market again, the fact that we have already paid a substantial sum for it would mean nothing. We are not likely to be able to prove ownership and, what is worse, we are even less likely to prove legal ownership. If found, and if the discovery is publicized too openly, the Cypriot government will claim it and will probably receive it. We can live with the loss of the money, but the loss of the object itself is hard to bear. Very hard." Pavolini shook his head despondently.

"Nothing," said Pavolini, "and what makes it more frustrating is that there is absolutely no reason to think he was robbed. He was under observation by many, as I said, when he collapsed, and airport guards were at his side almost at once. His pockets were filled with the usual—a wallet reasonably supplied with cash, including both American and Canadian bills. There were coins, credit cards, keys, handkerchief, and so on."

"Nothing of interest at all?" asked Halsted incredulously.

"Well, one of the items was a claim check. We, as his employers, were able to effect a claim to that—though not without considerable legal problems. However, it doesn't help us at all. I suspect—I hope—that the claim check is for the package containing the object, but what good does that do me? The claim check is entirely without distinguishing mark. It is red and rectangular and made of cardboard. On it in black block letters is the number 17. On the other side, nothing. There is no way of identifying where on earth—or, at least, where in Halifax—the ticket belongs."

Trumbull said, "Nothing else? No address book? No folded slip of paper in his wallet?"

"Believe me, we went over everything in his pockets and in his baggage—under the eyes of the police, I might add—and there

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seemed nothing that could indicate the place where he had checked the package. There was an address book, of course, but in it was not one Halifax address; nor was there a single non-Halifax address that seemed in any way suspicious. There was his scratch pad, too. If that had not been present, I would have been sure he was robbed. Still, under the closest scrutiny, there was no address on any page of it. We might have tested everything for secret writing—I thought of that—but why on earth should he have gone to such lengths?"

"I suppose," said Halsted, "you might use *force majeure*. You might go to every place in Halifax that could conceivably use such claim checks and try to recover a package at each one."

"Every hotel? Every restaurant? Every train and bus terminal? Every airport?" said Pavolini. "That would truly be an act of desperation. No—we tried cutting down the possibilities instead."

"The doodles!" cried out Gonzalo.

"You haven't forgotten," said Pavolini. "Yes, there were doodles on the top page of the scratch pad. They might have been made on the plane, but he doodled chiefly when in conference, and that must have been in Halifax."

"But you said," Avalon pointed out, "that there was no address on any page of the scratch pad."

"That's right, but there were other things. There were his characteristic geometric constructions, as identifiable as fingerprints. If that were all there was, it would be useless, but there was more. It was one of those rare occasions when he constructed letters and I knew there must have been some word, some phrase, which had attracted his attention. Unfortunately, he had written down only part of it.

There was a capital B, a small i, and a small f, each in ornate script. Those letters were absolutely identifiable as his handiwork, too. In other words, Bif was the beginning of some word that had caught his attention, while he was negotiating the sale, and if we could work out what the word was and where he had seen it, I have the feeling we would know where he had checked the package."

Trumbull said, "For all you know, that doodle may have been made the day before the negotiations, or the week before. It may have no connection with the negotiations at all."

"Possible," said Pavolini, "but not likely. In my experience, Jelinsky never kept the doodles long but disposed of the used top sheet when beginning another. Therefore, it could not have been very old."

"But you can't be sure," said Trumbull, persisting.

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"No, I can't be sure but I have nothing else to go by," said Pavolini.

Gonzalo said eagerly, "Do you have the paper with you?"

"No," said Pavolini, lifting his arms up and then letting them drop. "How can you think I would carry it with me? It is in my office safe. Could I have imagined this matter would come up in the evening's discussion?"

"It's just that it seemed to me," said Gonzalo, "that if we could see the doodles we might get something out of them that you didn't. Could you reproduce them for us?"

Pavolini lifted his upper lip. "I'm not an artist. I couldn't do it. I couldn't even reproduce the curlicues in the letters. Believe me, there is nothing there but the letters, and nothing of any significance but the letters. Nothing."

Halsted said, "The letters don't seem very significant to me. What word starts with Bif anyway?"

"Bifurcate," said Rubin.

"Fine!" said Pavolini. "A useful word, indeed. Where would Jelinsky see 'bifurcate' in the course of the negotiations? My friends, I did not sit about and puzzle out the matter. I used the unabridged dictionary. 'Bifurcate' means 'to divide in two.' There is also 'bifid' meaning 'in two parts.' There are the chemical terms 'biformate,' 'bifluoride,' and so on. These are all useless. It isn't in the realm of possibility that he was looking at any of these words while he was sitting—wherever he was sitting—with the man who was selling the artifact. There is only one word, *only one*, that seemed as though it might be useful and that word is 'bifocal.' "

Rubin said, "Was the man Jelinsky dealt with an optometrist?"

"I know nothing about the man, but it seems reasonable that the negotiations might have taken place at an optometrist's, or, more likely, across the street from an optometrist's. With the word 'bifocal' staring him in the face, Jelinsky might well have started writing it absent-mindedly."

"It's possible," said Avalon judiciously.

But Pavolini folded his arms across his chest, looked sadly at the men assembled about the table, and said, "It didn't work. I had a couple of our men scour the city to find optometrists in whose windows, or on whose signs, there might be the word 'bifocal.' We have not yet found one. Optometrists do not stress bifocals. Those are for elderly people. They do their best to impress the public with beauty and with the chic qualities of their eyeglasses. Everything for youth or pretended youth. Nevertheless, we are not finished looking."

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Drake said, "You might be looking in the wrong direction. If Jelinsky made his letters with curlicues they might not be easily identifiable at all. For instance, it's easy to draw a small e and have it look like a small i. Jelinsky may not have intended Bif at all. He may have intended Bef. His pen might have skipped the little curve because the paper was greasy or creased at that spot."

"What would you have with Bef?" asked Rubin.

"I don't know. He might have been starting to write 'Beforehand,' let us say, because he had outwitted his rivals and gotten to the seller beforehand."

"That wouldn't help find the package," said Rubin.

"Who says it has to?" demanded Halsted. "What Jelinsky wrote might have nothing to do with the package and might be of no help at all. We're only trying to learn the truth, and if the truth doesn't help us—" Drake spread his arms in fatalistic resignation.

Pavolini said, "No, no. Let me stop you. I can't say whether it would help us if we penetrated the meaning of the word. Perhaps not. But at least I'm quite certain that the word begins with Bif and nothing else. The i was an i and not an e because, for one thing, Jelinsky placed a dot above it. In fact, Jelinsky even curlicued the dot so that it was a kind of triple dot."

"A triple dot? Curlicued?" said Gonzalo. "What do you mean?"

"Like this," said Pavolini. "I can draw that much, anyway." He withdrew a small pad from an inner jacket pocket, tore off a sheet of paper, and drew three short vertical lines, closely spaced.

"There," he said. "It was very small."

It was at this point that Henry interrupted. "Mr. Pavolini, may I see that piece of paper."

Pavolini stared at Henry for a moment, then, with a trace of amusement, he said, "If you wish to look at it, waiter, here it is. Perhaps you will have a theory, too."

Gonzalo said, "I wouldn't take that attitude, Mr. Pavolini. Henry is our star member."

Pavolini said, "Very well. Go ahead. From those three little lines, can you tell me where the package is hidden?"

"Not exactly, Mr. Pavolini," said Henry, with careful deference. "I can think of two places and there may possibly be one or two others, but I can't pin it down precisely to one place."

"Indeed?" said Pavolini. "You can give me two, possibly four, places, and the package will be in one of them?"

"I believe so, sir."

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"You believe so. Wonderful! In that case just give me the four.—I challenge you." Pavolini's voice had risen perceptibly.

"May I first point out that since there is no really hopeful word in English that begins with Bif, it may be that Mr. Jelinsky was not writing an English word."

"Take my word for it," said Pavolini, "Jelinsky knew no language other than English. He was not an educated man and—except for his specialty—really knew very little."

"I will accept that," said Henry, "but we have to ask ourselves not which word he knew and understood, but which word he encountered in the place in which he was negotiating the sale. If they were seated in a French restaurant, that restaurant—located in a city of British culture—might well sell steak, but would have it on the menu, or in the window, or on the sign, according to a spelling all their own. Beefsteak, in French, becomes Biftek."

Pavolini said, in a small voice, "Biftek?"

"Yes, sir. I know of two good French restaurants in Halifax and there may be one or two more. I suggest you try the cloakroom in all four, if necessary."

Pavolini said, "You are guessing!"

"Not really, sir. Not after I saw the three little lines you drew for the dot of the i. Might those lines have looked a bit more like this, sir?"

On the same sheet of paper Henry drew:

"Because if they did, that is a fleur-de-lis which you would find prominently displayed in one place or another in almost every French restaurant. If we take the three letters Bif *and* the fleur-de-lis together, then one can scarcely doubt where Jelinsky was sitting when he made this doodle."

Pavolini's mouth was open, and now he closed it with an audible snap. "By heaven, you are right. I will leave, gentlemen. I will leave *now*. Goodbye to all of you, with my thanks for a wonderful dinner—but I have work to do."

He began to hurry out, then stopped and turned. "My thanks to you particularly, Henry, but how did you do it?"

Henry said gravely, "Restaurants are my specialty, sir."

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a *NEW* short story by

PATRICIA MOYES

The seed of murder had been sown . . . a sophisticated story about a sophisticated revenge . . .

A MATTER OF SUCCESSION

by PATRICIA MOYES

They say there's no fool like an old fool, and while fifty-five may not be considered actually senile, it was not until he reached this comparatively advanced age that George, Viscount Biddleford, younger brother of James, 4th Earl of Camden, really lost his head—and over a girl in her early twenties at that.

His only previous lapse from grace had been as a much younger man, when he had helped his brother James sail the latter's yacht across the Atlantic to New York. There he had become involved with a pretty young aspiring actress named Maisie Wilkins. By the time he realized that despite her prettiness she was both vulgar and boring, things had reached a serious stage—George and Maisie were unofficially engaged, the promise of marriage having been Maisie's adamant price for the surrender of her virtue. James, however, who was something of an adept at sidestepping awkward situations with the opposite sex, had skillfully disentangled his brother and hurried him back to England.

The third Earl—father to James and George—had had a distinguished career in the Royal Navy, and both his sons inherited his love of the sea. Characteristically, James literally took to the water and became that swashbuckling figure—the single-handed ocean sailor. Well-known for his often scandalous love affairs, he had never married, and at fifty-seven—he was just two years older than

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George—he remained wedded to his boat, and was planning another Atlantic crossing.

George, on the other hand, preferred a quiet life ashore, and only rarely did any actual sailing. His sea fever took the form of designing yachts, and of course he designed and built all his brother's boats at his small shipyard on the south coast of England. The yard was really no more than a hobby—it went in for excellence and had never been expected to make money. After his one, disastrous trip to the States, George married a quiet, suitable girl of good family, and they settled down to a life of stupefying respectability in a large country house, about halfway from the shipyard and the family seat, Camden Hall, in Hampshire.

When George was fifty-four, his wife died, childless. Left alone, he sold the house and moved in with James to Camden Hall. He also acquired a small bachelor apartment in London, and it was on one of his visits there that he met Gloria Patterson.

It was a crony at George's club, as a matter of fact, who had insisted on introducing them. For some reason, George's friend explained, Gloria was immensely anxious to meet George. She was a photographic model, American, blonde, and stunningly beautiful. George was amused but also flattered. He agreed to go to a small dinner party at his friend's house to meet the young lady. And that did it.

Of course, Gloria deliberately set out to be fascinating. Soon George was spending nearly all his time in London. Once he took Gloria to Camden Hall for the weekend, but James—home from one of his voyages—had taken an instant dislike to her. George put this down to jealousy—James was not used to taking second place when it came to beautiful young women. The weekend was not a success and was not repeated.

In London, however, the two became inseparable—dining, theatre-going, and dancing together. Gloria was clever enough to keep George on a string by refusing anything but the mildest of love-making. By the time he realized what she was really up to, he was so infatuated that one might describe him as actually out of his mind.

What Gloria wanted was marriage. No problem. George was a widower and asked no better than to marry her tomorrow. But this was not good enough. Finally Gloria came out with it. She not only wanted marriage, she wanted to be the Countess of Camden. Viscountess Biddleford would not do, under any circumstances.

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George was stunned. "How can you ever be the Countess of Camden?" he demanded. "James is never going to marry you."

Gloria smiled. "No, George darling. But you are next in line, aren't you?"

"James is only two years older than I am. He'll probably outlive me."

"He might," said Gloria thoughtfully. "On the other hand, he might not."

They were sitting in Gloria's penthouse apartment, drinking a pre-dinner cocktail. She stood up, took George's glass and went to the bar to refill it. She said, "He's off on another lone sailing trip, isn't he?"

"You know he is."

"Well . . . he might have an accident at sea."

George laughed. "James? Not he. He's about the finest sailor in the world."

"So was Joshua Slocum," Gloria remarked, "but he was lost at sea in the end." She poured martinis. "You designed James's new boat, didn't you?"

"Of course. She's in the yard now, having a final checkup."

No more was said on that occasion. Gloria knew where to stop. The seed had been sown. It sprang up into luxuriant foliage the following weekend, when George went alone to Camden Hall and informed James that he intended to marry Gloria. He was still sure that he could convince her that being a Viscountess was not the worst fate in the world. James told him bluntly not to be a fool. Anybody could see that Gloria was no more than a grasping little golddigger. The row between the brothers developed rapidly, and James made his final threat.

Under the British system of inheritance, where large estates such as Camden are concerned, the eldest son gets not only the title, but the worldly goods that go with it. George's high standard of living had always depended on a regular allowance—an allowance which had been paid without question, first by his father and then by his brother. If George married Gloria, said James, the allowance would stop.

George stormed out of the house and back to London and Gloria. Inevitably his thoughts went back to that enigmatic conversation in the penthouse. The next evening, in that same apartment, George said, nervously, "You . . . you remember what you said about . . . about being lost at sea?"

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Gloria, who was again preparing drinks, just nodded. George went on, "I could do it, you know. I mean, James and the foreman will be doing a final check on the boat tomorrow, but it's my yard, after all. There'd be nothing to stop me going along afterwards and . . . well, just loosening something. Or weakening the rigging, where it wouldn't show. Something that would be okay in fine weather, like we're having now—but when he runs into an Atlantic gale . . ."

"You'd really do that, George?" Gloria managed to sound shocked.

"I'd . . . I'd do anything to get that damned swine of a brother of mine out of the way!"

He didn't mean it, of course. George was not the stuff of which murderers are made. Nevertheless, curiously enough, James, 4th Earl of Camden, sailed out of Southampton Sound the following week, headed west, and was never seen again. True, there had been a storm in the Atlantic Ocean—but no worse than he had encountered before in his adventurous career. The boat was reported overdue—one week, two weeks, three weeks. No radio communication. Finally some wreckage was found. James was declared legally dead, and George became the fifth Earl of Camden.

Gloria, who had been in Paris on a modeling job, came back to London when she heard the news.

"So you actually did it, George?" Gloria sounded amused. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"I did nothing at all," George replied, with some heat. "But all the same . . . well, now I am Lord Camden. Gloria . . ." His voice trembled. "Gloria, you will marry me now, won't you?"

George was never to forget the look that she gave him. "Marry you?" she said. "I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth."

"But—you said—"

"Apart from anything else," Gloria added, "I am already married."

"You're . . . *what*?"

"Would you care to see the marriage certificate? Here it is." She extracted a paper from her handbag. It recorded the marriage of Gloria Wilkins to Michael Patterson in New York a year ago. Just before Gloria had come to London, in fact.

At first George was so stunned that the significance of the name was lost on him. Then he remembered Maisie. Maisie Wilkins.

"And in any case," added Gloria, "I don't really approve of incest, do you—Daddy?"

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George finally found speech. "Damn you!" he shouted. "You filthy little—"

"As a matter of fact," Gloria went on, "I'm not sure whether I'm your daughter or your niece. James may well have been my father."

"James!"

"Oh, didn't you know?"

"All I know," said George heavily, "is that when my position with your mother became—well, awkward, James simply shot me home on the next boat and told me he would cope with everything. I've heard no more from that day to this."

"Then I'll bring you up to date," said Gloria icily. "As soon as you had gone, James went to Mother and told her that you had ratted on her and gone sneaking back to England. However, he said, as far as he was concerned that was the best thing that could have happened, as he himself had been in love with her all along, and had only kept quiet because of George. Now there was nothing to stop him from making her an honorable offer of marriage. But, of course, he would have to get his father's consent and a lot of such rubbish. Meanwhile . . . well, you guessed it. As soon as he had been to bed with her he upped anchor and sailed away.

"When Mother found she was pregnant, what could she do? She could hardly bring a paternity suit or a breach of promise case against both of you—and dear James made sure that both liaisons were known to people who could and would give evidence. Mother had just landed her first decent part, but of course she had to give it up when she found I was on the way. Between the two of you, you and your brother ruined her life. She had to give up the stage and take housekeeping jobs so as to look after me. Fortunately I grew up to be good-looking and made a success of modeling. When I was offered work in England, I thought I would take a little revenge. On her behalf."

"You've certainly succeeded," said George bitterly.

"Oh, but I haven't started yet." Gloria smiled, like a cat.

"What do you mean?"

"One way or the other," said Gloria, "my mother deserves to be the Countess of Camden. And I intend that she shall be just that."

"Don't be idiotic," said George, who was beginning to recover a little. "You can't force me to marry Maisie."

"Ah, but I can. You remember that conversation we had about arranging for James's boat to sink in a storm? I have it on tape."

"But I never—"

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"What you did or didn't do hardly matters, does it?" remarked Gloria sweetly. "Are you prepared to have me take that tape to the police?"

"You wouldn't dare. You'd be just as much involved as I would."

"Oh, no. I only recorded the second conversation, and I was very careful what I said when the recorder was on. However, if you're prepared to risk it—" Gloria shrugged her lovely shoulders.

George spluttered and blustered, but there was really nothing he could do. Gloria arranged the whole thing. The London *Times* carried the announcement of the forthcoming marriage of George, 5th Earl of Camden, to Miss Maisie Wilkins of New York City.

And of course Maisie arrived at London Airport, to be met by a beaming Gloria and a scowling George. There was little trace of her former prettiness left. She had grown stout and blowsy, had dyed her hair orange, and smelled of cheap perfume. The wedding took place quietly, and Maisie, Countess of Camden, moved into Camden Hall. Gloria remained in London.

George stood it for just six months. Then he had what was euphemistically described as an accident while cleaning his shotgun.

With both the childless brothers dead, a search was on for the heir to the Camden title. He was found without too much difficulty—a personable young man, grandson of the third Earl's oldest sister, who had married an American and gone to live in the United States. His name was Michael Patterson. And if the foreman of the Biddleford shipyard ever noticed any resemblance between the handsome, clean-shaven 6th Earl and the slouching, bearded American hippie who had taken a casual job at the yard the previous summer, and vanished into thin air the day that James sailed, he never mentioned it.

So Maisie, the Dowager Countess, moved into the Dower House, and the 6th Earl and his lovely young wife Gloria took possession of the Hall and the estates. What really endeared the new Countess to the local people was the warm friendship between her and the Dowager, whom they had always considered a little bit—well, she's American, of course, one has to make allowances, but still . . .

Soon, however, under the loving guidance of the new Countess, Maisie slimmed down, began to dress elegantly, allowed her hair to take on its natural silver, and made friends in the county. The Earl was frequently away in the United States, and the two women were constant companions. Very touching, really, people said. Almost like mother and daughter.

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a *NEW* short story by

R. L. STEVENS

It was a short dead-end alley between the bowling alley and the next building, with a locked door at the dead end and no break at all in the opposite wall. No one in Sam's Bar could have seen anything happening at the back of the alley . . .

JUST PASSING THROUGH

by R. L. STEVENS

Rudder got off the bus at a little town called Southgate, which was as far as his funds would take him. He'd been in towns like this before—most of his life, he sometimes thought. He figured he could always get a few days' work washing dishes or sweeping up at the pool hall, enough to earn the fare to the next town at least.

He had no possessions but the clothes on his back, and as he strolled down the main street, which was called Maple Street, he decided that even more important than the next bus ticket was a new pair of jeans, some underwear, and a couple of shirts. There was a drab-looking men's shop next door to the bowling alley and he decided he'd pay it a visit when he'd earned a little money.

The bowling alley seemed a likely spot to try for work first so he went in and spent his last dollar for a beer at the bar up front. "The boss around?" he asked the bartender, who pointed at a burly man in a T-shirt who'd just finished a game on one of the coin-operated electronic machines that lined the back wall. Rudder picked up his beer and strolled over.

"My name's Max Rudder," he said—it was the name he was using at the present time—"I'm just passing through town and I'm looking for a few days' work. Got anything I might handle here?"

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The burly man shook his hand. "Sam Mannatroy. Glad to meet you. Have you had any experience painting?"

"Sure."

"I need somebody to paint the walls and ceiling of the bowling alley. But it needs to be sanded first. The paint's beginning to flake off."

"I could do it for you."

"Minimum wage is all I can pay."

"That's fine."

"When can you start?"

Rudder shrugged. "Right now, I guess. Soon's I finish my beer."

He'd been lucky to find work at the first place he tried, but he wasn't too surprised. Small towns like Southgate always needed people willing to do a few days' work for less than union scale.

"I'll go get the paint in a while."

"Mr. Mannatroy?"

"Yeah?"

"Any chance of getting an advance? I need a place to sleep tonight."

Mannatroy studied him more carefully and then said, "Sure. Here's ten bucks. And there's a cot in the storeroom if you want to stay here. It's pretty noisy till after the bar closes, though."

"That won't bother me. Thanks a lot."

He spent the rest of the afternoon moving ladders from the storeroom and getting them into position. There were just four bowling alleys and the area to be painted wasn't too large. Still, with the sanding it would probably take him two or three days. A close look at the ceiling showed him the whole area would have to be smoothed down before new paint could be applied.

"No bowling today?" a girl's voice called up to him from the scoring table.

He glanced down from his ladder and saw her standing with her hands on her hips, staring up at him. She was thin and blonde, with the sort of frizzy hair girls were doing. He guessed she was about twenty years old. "I'm getting ready to paint the place. The alleys will be closed for about three days."

"Damn!"

He came down the ladder and walked over to her. "Do you like to bowl?"

"Whenever I can. I haven't seen *you* here before, though."

"My name's Max Rudder." He held out his hand and she shook it.

"Kate O'Neill. I work at the bakery. You new in town?"

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"I'm just passing through. I'll be here as long as it takes to do this painting."

"Make sure Sam pays you. He's tight with a buck sometimes."

He smiled at her friendly advice. She was a cute girl, the sort he might have seriously courted ten years earlier. "What do you do for excitement in this town, Kate?"

She shrugged. "Bowl, I guess."

A curly-haired fellow in tight jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt, with tattoos on both arms, swaggered over from the bar area. "Hey, Kate, how about a beer?"

She hesitated a moment and then said, "Sure, Cobb. In a couple of minutes."

"Who's this?" Cobb asked, coming up to Rudder.

"Max Rudder, Cobb Slattery. Max is painting the ceiling."

Slattery glanced up and gave a snort. "What are you—doin' it for drinks, Rudder?"

"I just work for cash."

The tattooed youth squinted at him, seeming to size him up. Then he backed off. "See you in the bar, Kate."

"Yeah, sure." She smiled tentatively at Rudder. "Don't mind Cobb. He thinks he's the local tough guy. Dropped out of high school when he was sixteen and bought a motorcycle."

"Do you go out with him?"

"I have a beer with him once in a while. Once he took me out back, but that didn't get him nowhere. He hasn't tried it since." Her tone was boastful and it made him chuckle.

"You must be one tough girl."

"I hold my own." She gave him an unexpected wink and strolled off toward the bar. "See you around, Max. Hurry up with that paintin' so I can get back to my bowling."

He went back up the ladder and started scraping the flakes of loose paint. When he'd been at it about an hour Sam Mannatroy wandered in. "How's it coming, Rudder?" he asked.

"Pretty good. I think I can start painting tomorrow afternoon if I keep at it. I hate to see your bowlers disappointed."

"Hell with 'em! Knock it off for today. Start fresh in the morning."

"O.K.," Rudder agreed, coming down the ladder. There was still time to buy some clothes before the store closed.

Close up, Mannatroy's breath was heavy with beer. He slapped Rudder on the shoulder and said, "Stop by the bar later an' I'll buy you a drink."

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"I'll do that."

Rudder hit the men's shop just as they were closing. The clerk rather reluctantly stayed on duty while he picked up some underwear and socks. There was only enough money left for one T-shirt, but at least it was clean. With his next money he could get the other things washed at a laundromat down the street.

Next he checked out the storeroom cot Sam Mannatroy had offered for his use. It was a lumpy thing piled high with cartons of supplies. He unloaded a box of bowling shoes and tried it out. It was nothing great, but he was used to worse. He changed into his new clothes and sauntered out to the bar.

The place was in something of an uproar. Mannatroy, bleary on beer, had been playing the electronic Space Wars game when the machine got the better of him and he smashed his right fist through the glass. He was cut and bleeding and yelped with pain whenever anyone tried to touch it. A tall man wearing a peaked cap with a badge on it motioned to Rudder. "Come here, fella. You the painter he hired today?"

Rudder felt his stomach turn over. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Can you drive a car? He needs to get to the hospital with that hand. If you can't take him I'll have to."

Rudder relaxed. "Sure. I can drive him. You the sheriff or something?"

"Police chief," the tall man answered. "Forsyth. If Sam would stay sober it would sure make my job easier."

Chief Forsyth helped Rudder get the injured man into the little pickup truck with *Sam's Bar & Bowling* painted on the door. He gave Rudder directions to the hospital a few blocks away.

"How are you feeling?" Rudder asked the burly man as they drove off. "Does it hurt much?"

Sam Mannatroy shook his head vigorously from side to side, as if trying to clear away the cobwebs of beer. "Damn machine! I'm gonna have 'em all taken out!"

"How's the hand?" Rudder asked again.

"Hurts like hell!"

At the hospital they found that Mannatroy had broken two small bones. After first stitching up the cuts, they put the hand in a cast. The doctor, who seemed to know Sam from past encounters, told him he shouldn't drink so much. But the big man merely grunted and made his departure. He was anxious to get back to the bar.

When they returned, Chief Forsyth was gone and Rudder didn't

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see Kate O'Neill there either. He wondered if she'd gone off with the Slattery fellow on his motorcycle. Mannatroy bought him a couple of beers and he nursed them down at the end of the bar until close to midnight. Then he went back to the storeroom and tried to sleep. The jukebox played country and western music without stopping, reminding Rudder of a girl he'd lived with a long time ago.

He fell asleep thinking of her, and of how things used to be.

In the morning a state-police car was cruising slowly along Maple Street, past the bowling alley. Rudder watched it through the front window until it rounded a corner down the street, then he went back to his breakfast. There was a little kitchen behind the bar and he'd helped himself to some bacon and eggs.

Sam Mannatroy came in shortly after nine o'clock, favoring his bandaged hand. "You sure get an early start," he said, seeing Rudder up on the ladder.

"I'll never finish it if I don't. How's the hand?"

"I'll live."

"I helped myself to some bacon and eggs for breakfast, O.K.?"

"Sure. Did you get much sleep back there?"

"Enough. I can sleep just about anywhere."

Mannatroy went into the bar and started cleaning up.

By noon Rudder had finished scraping the ceiling above the alleys. He took a break for a beer and a sandwich and then started painting up in a far corner. It was midafternoon when Kate O'Neill came in again. "Hello," she called up to him. "How's it going?"

"I'm getting there."

"No bowling yet?"

He paused in his painting and looked at the far lane. It was clear of ladders for the moment. "Hell, why not?" he decided, coming down to join her. "I'll play you one quick game and then it's back to work. O.K.?"

"Sure!"

She was a good bowler, with a powerful right arm that guided the ball with unerring accuracy. At the end of the game she'd scored 187 to his 154. "I'm out of practice," he decided. "It's been a long time."

"That explains it. I'm here most afternoons when I finish up at the bakery. I broke two hundred last week."

"That's great! Let me buy you a beer to celebrate." He came back

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with two tall bottles and handed one to her. "I looked for you in the bar last night."

"I left early."

"You missed the excitement." He told her about Sam Mannatroy putting his hand through the machine.

She chuckled at that. "I saw the bandage. I wondered what happened to him."

"You go off with that Cobb?" he asked casually.

She picked some fuzz off her T-shirt. "Yeah. It was another pawing session but he didn't get anywhere. Maybe he'll leave me alone now."

He took a swig of beer. "You're an unusual girl, Kate."

"If you mean I'm not like the others that hang around here, I guess you're right. I got a little more sense than most of them." She finished her beer and hopped to her feet. "How about another game?"

"I can't. Gotta get back up my ladder. Tell you what, though—I'll play you tomorrow afternoon if I finish the job by then."

She grinned at him. "It's a deal."

He went back to his painting, and when Mannatroy suggested he knock off at six o'clock Rudder told him he wanted to keep at it and finish the ceiling. "I think I can do the walls in one day and be all done tomorrow afternoon."

"You're a good worker," the big man said. "Finish it tomorrow and you can keep that ten bucks I advanced you as a bonus."

The ceiling over the alleys was finished around eight o'clock and Rudder went in back to wash up. When he emerged he could see there was a good crowd in the bar. Cobb Slattery was there with another young guy in a motorcycle jacket, lounging down at the end where Rudder had sat the night before.

"How's the painting coming?" Cobb asked him.

"I should finish tomorrow."

Cobb elbowed his friend. "Look, Hayes, this guy paints ceilings over bowling alleys! How's that for an occupation?"

Hayes glanced at Rudder and grunted. He wasn't interested in pursuing the subject. Then Cobb spotted Kate coming in. "There's that O'Neill chick again. I'm goin' to have another go at her." He whacked Hayes good-naturedly on the arm and moved away.

"Is he a friend of yours?" Hayes asked Rudder.

"I just met him yesterday."

"Wish I could say that! Cobb's not happy unless he's fightin' or lovin'."

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They had another beer together but the conversation lagged. Then Rudder suddenly realized that both Cobb and Kate were gone from the bar and he wondered if they'd left together. Hayes excused himself. "Gotta use the john," he said. "I'll be back."

The bartender on duty was unfamiliar to Rudder. "It seems odd not to have Sam back there pounding at the machines," Rudder said to him.

"He's around somewhere," the bartender answered. "A few beers and he'll be back at it, even with the busted hand."

Rudder saw Hayes come out of the men's room and walk to the side door. It opened into a short alley where the motorcycles were usually parked. Almost at once there was some sort of commotion outside. He heard Hayes yell and slid off the bar stool to see what was going on.

A crowd was gathering at the side door. Rudder pushed his way through and saw Hayes struggling with Kate O'Neill in the alley. She had a broken beer bottle in her right hand and there was blood on her. "Get the cops!" Hayes shouted. "She just killed Cobb Slattery!"

Chief Forsyth arrived with two other uniformed officers and the alley was cleared. While Sam Mannatroy argued with one officer about disrupting his business just because some no-good punk got himself killed, Rudder managed to get his first look at the scene of the crime. It was a short dead-end alley between the bowling alley and the next building, with a closed door at the dead end and no break at all in the opposite wall. The side door of Sam's Bar & Bowling was near the street and there was a window further back, but the window was covered over by a beer-company sign. No one in the bar could have seen anything happening at the back of the alley.

Hayes's story was that he'd gone out in the alley to see if Slattery's cycle was still there and found Kate O'Neill crouched over Cobb's body at the end of the alley, a broken bottle in her hand. Slattery's face and throat had been cut—the neck wound had killed him.

Rudder managed to stand close enough to hear Forsyth's questioning of the girl. "Did you kill him, Kate?"

"Of course I didn't! I was on my way to the movies and only stopped at the bar for a minute. Cobb came up to me and asked for a date. I told him I was busy—I was out with him just last night and that was enough for quite a while. I left and he followed me outside."

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The police chief nodded. "If you were defending your honor it's understandable, Kate. No jury would convict you."

"I wasn't defending anything," she answered angrily. "I walked on down the street and he didn't follow. Then I heard something from the alley where the motorcycles are parked—glass breaking and a gasp or moan. I thought Cobb might have hurt himself on his cycle and I came back to see. He was sprawled back there where he is now and this broken bottle was—was still sticking in his neck. I went to him and tried to pull it out—that's when Hayes came out the door and saw me."

Rudder moved forward. "Could Cobb have fallen on the bottle accidentally?" he asked.

Chief Forsyth glared at him. "Who in hell are you?"

"Max Rudder. Remember? You had me drive Sam to the hospital last night."

"Yeah, I remember now. Get back inside."

"I might be able to help," Rudder said. "I saw Kate leave the bar alone." It wasn't exactly true, but he believed her story.

"Did you see Slattery too?"

"He may have gone out after her. I didn't notice." He glanced farther down the alley, trying to get a view of it in the failing light. Already the lights along Maple Street were going on, but they didn't quite reach to the end of the alley.

"Was Kate carrying a bottle of beer when she left the bar?"

"I don't think so, no," Rudder answered. "I'd have noticed if she was."

"Get some lights in here," Forsyth ordered his men. "I want to look this place over."

The door at the end of the alley was locked. "That just goes to the basement," Sam Mannatroy explained. "I always keep it locked so drunks don't wander in."

Chief Forsyth bent to examine a fresh mark on the right wall of the alley near the back. "Look here—this is where the bottle was broken against the bricks! See the broken glass underneath?"

"What does that prove?" Rudder asked.

"Slattery was coming at her, backing her down the alley. When she reached the end and couldn't go no further, she picked up a beer bottle, smashed it against the wall, and jabbed the jagged end into his neck."

"It looks like that's the way it happened," Rudder agreed. "But it could have been somebody else. Why pick on the girl?"

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"She was found with the body. She had the neck of the beer bottle in her hand. And look here." He held out a closed switchblade knife. "Cobb Slattery had this in his pocket, but he never drew it. If he was facing anyone else he'd have pulled a knife. He figured he didn't need it against a girl. That was his mistake."

"You can't book her," Rudder argued. "Even if it happened that way, it was self-defense."

"That's for a jury to decide." Forsyth turned back toward the entrance to the alley where Kate O'Neill stood with one of the policemen. "Ready to make a statement, Kate?"

"I made my statement," she said, trying to keep calm. "I found him like that. I'd just reached the body when Hayes started yelling at me."

Rudder started to say something and then shut up. He turned instead and went back into the bar, pushing his way through the crowd still jammed into the side doorway. He couldn't get a drink because there was no one behind the bar. He walked on into the bowling alley and stood for a long time staring up at the ceiling. It was a good paint job, if he said so himself. Tomorrow he'd do the walls and then Mannatroy would pay him and he'd be on his way. He'd take a bus to the next state, far enough away so he could start a new life. The girl meant nothing to him. She was only someone he'd bowled a game with.

He turned and went back to the bar. Hayes had resumed his seat and the bartender was back on duty. "They took away the body," Hayes said before Rudder could ask. "There's nothing more to see."

"Not too broken up about your friend's death?"

"Hell, the way he picked fights all the time I always figured Cobb would end up dead in some alley. I just never thought he'd get it from a girl."

"Where is she now?"

"Forsyth's got her in the back of the police car." He lit a cigarette and added, "Buy you a beer?"

Rudder's throat was dry but he said, "No. No, thanks." He got up and walked toward the door.

The police car was parked in front, its red lights circling their warning flashes. He could see Kate O'Neill hunched in the back, her head down. She might have been crying.

Damn, he thought. Damn life anyhow. It always lays traps for suckers.

Chief Forsyth came over and started to get into the car.

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"Wait a minute, Chief," Rudder said. "You've got the wrong person. She didn't kill him."

"Huh? What are you going on about now?"

"She didn't kill him," Rudder repeated. "You want to listen to me?"

"Only if you're going to confess."

"I was in the bar when it happened. But think about how you reconstructed it. He's backing her down the alley and she breaks the bottle against the brick wall—right?"

"Yeah, that's right." Forsyth was looking at him curiously. "So what?"

"The mark on the wall is on the right side if you're facing the dead end. If she was backing up, as she must have been, facing *him*, it would be on her left."

"Yeah," the chief agreed.

"That means the killer had the bottle in his left hand. He used his left hand to jab Slattery with the bottle."

"Go on."

"Kate O'Neill is right-handed. I know because I bowled with her this afternoon and I noticed it."

"Hell, that don't mean—"

"If Kate had killed him, she'd have broken the beer bottle with her right hand. And the mark would have been on her right side, on the left-hand wall, looking down the alley."

"She *must* have killed him," Forsyth argued. "There was nobody else in the alley."

"Exactly," Rudder hammered home the point, certain now he had Forsyth's attention. "If Kate's telling the truth she turned toward the alley when she heard the noise. No one could have left by the street side without her seeing them. And I had Hayes in sight walking toward the door and opening it—no one came in that way either."

"You telling me he cut his own throat?"

"No."

"Or that Hayes did it?"

"He couldn't have. Kate was already in the alley then."

"Then where did your phantom killer go, wise guy? He didn't come out the alley or go back into the bar. Where did he go?"

"Through the basement door at the end of the alley. It's the only possibility."

"You heard Mannatroy tell us he keeps it locked," Forsyth said firmly.

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"I know. And that's why Sam Mannatroy has to be the killer."

"Wait a minute—"

"Think about it, Chief. We know the sort of temper Sam has when he's been drinking. He came out of that basement door just as Slattery went into the alley for his motorcycle, probably intending to chase after Kate. Some old argument started again, and Slattery came at him. Mannatroy broke the beer bottle with his left hand because his right hand is in a cast. And for that same reason Slattery didn't pull his knife. He figured he didn't need it against an opponent with only one good hand."

Forsyth sighed and walked over to where Mannatroy was standing with some others near the alley. "Sam, I got to ask you some more questions about the killing. Can anybody say where you were when it happened?"

Sam Mannatroy's eyes darted from the chief's face to Rudder's and then back again. He wet his lips and said, "I don't know."

"Let me see your key ring, Sam. I want to know if the key to that basement door is on it."

"He was no good," Mannatroy muttered. "Always gettin' girls in trouble and pickin' fights. I should have done it long ago."

"Sam," the police chief warned, "I have to advise you of your rights. Anything you say—"

"I want a lawyer," Mannatroy told him.

Kate O'Neill came in to where Rudder was sitting by the bowling alleys. "Looks like you just talked yourself out of a job," she said.

"Looks like."

"He won't even be around to pay you for the work you already did."

"No. I thought about that."

"I guess I gotta thank you."

"Don't mention it."

She sat down next to him. "You were a detective once, weren't you? Only a detective could have figured that out."

He gave a sharp laugh. "A detective? No, I was never a detective. I was a murderer."

"What?"

"I killed a man in an alley five years ago. It wasn't much different from that killing tonight. Maybe that's what made me such an expert."

"But— Why aren't you in jail?"

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"I was until three days ago. I walked away from a work crew and stole some clothes and money from a farmhouse."

"They're looking for you?"

"Yeah, I guess so." He patted her knee and stood up before she could decide she owed him a favor. "It looks like we won't get in that second game of bowling, after all."

"Rudder—"

He smiled down at her. "I told you I was just passing through."

An hour later the state-police car spotted him on the highway outside town. As the headlights hit him he raised his hands above his head, standing perfectly still as the troopers walked toward him with drawn guns.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Uncle Abner story by

JOHN F. SUTER

Uncle Abner has an innate knowledge of the laws of nature—but even more important, he has an innate knowledge of the laws of human nature . . . a tale of "dark things and strange legends," of "terror by night" . . .

THE CORPSE CANDLE

by JOHN F. SUTER

I was not quite ready to leave for school when Leah Baird arrived at our door, bringing fear with her.

My father had gone out before daybreak to attend to the numerous demands of the farm, leaving my mother and me in the house. It was mid-September, and some of the heat of summer was still with us. The dew had begun to appear on the grass, and it would be there as I walked down our lane to the road, on my way to school.

The frantic knocking at our front door sounded just as I was getting up from the breakfast table. My mother stopped in the act of picking up my dishes.

"Who could that be at this hour?" she said. She quickly wiped her hands on her apron and hurried toward the door.

"It's Leah Baird," she said, looking through the glass. She turned the knob and spoke, even as she was opening the door. "Leah. What brings you here?"

The tall, darkly handsome woman who stood there was not a neighbor. She and her husband, Samuel, lived on Baird's Ridge, a wooded section a little over a mile away.

I had not seen her often and never in such obvious fright. Her skin was like ashes, and her dark eyes were open wide and glancing from side to side.

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"Miriam—I don't know what to do. Sam says he isn't afraid, but I am. He says he can protect us, and maybe he can, but I want somebody else, just the same. Is Rufus at home? Do you know where Abner is?"

My mother's concern was immediate. "I think you'd better come inside and let me get you some coffee. Rufus is here—all I need do is have Martin fetch him. As for Abner, I don't know, but maybe Rufus will."

She led our visitor to the table and poured her a cup of coffee from the pot. The woman's hands shook as she picked it up. I had never seen such a thing before.

"Martin," said my mother, "go and see if you can find your father."

I was saved the trouble. As I started for the front door, there were heavy footsteps on the porch and the sound of voices. The door opened, and my father and Uncle Abner came in, still talking.

"Rufus," my mother interrupted, "we have company."

Both of those big men looked startled.

"Why, Leah," my father said. "I'm not used to such an early visitor. You must forgive me."

Uncle Abner was observing her searchingly. "We seem to have disturbed you, Leah. Rufus and I can do our talking outside."

She had set the cup down. Both of her hands were tightly clenched in her lap.

"You misunderstand, Abner," she said tensely. "It is you and Rufus I came to see."

"Then I am glad that I came over," my uncle said, drawing a chair up to the table. My father did the same.

"What worries you?" my father asked.

Her lips quivered. "I'm afraid. I saw a corpse candle last night."

My mother stifled a gasp.

I had already heard of dark things and strange legends, but this was something new to me. What else had my mother kept from me?

My father was also puzzled. "What is that?"

"I have heard of it," Abner remarked. "It is something like the will-o'-the-wisp or perhaps what some call witch fire. Is that it, Leah?"

"It is like that," she said. "If I tell you what I saw, you will not fail to understand."

"You saw this in the cemetery below your house?" my uncle asked.

"Yes," she answered.

Uncle Abner had not asked an unusual question. Samuel and

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Leah Baird lived on Baird's Ridge. Their house looked down on a cemetery situated about two hundred feet below, on a round-topped grassy knoll fringed with pines. The Bairds' lives had been touched once before when one of the graves beneath them had been desecrated. When Leah spoke of a corpse candle, the name suggested the cemetery.

"Forgive my interruption," Abner said. "Please go on."

She wet her lips. "It was well after full dark. Even the crickets and the other insects were quiet. Perhaps it was getting on to bedtime. I went to look out to see if the moon was up yet, but it's late rising now. The sky had not begun to lighten.

"I looked around everywhere else, but there was only the dark woods. Then I glanced down at the cemetery, and I saw it."

"What did it look like?" my father asked.

The dark woman shivered. "It was a blue flame, dancing above the ground. Dancing, and I knew it was going to move—"

"In what part of the cemetery?" my uncle asked.

"In the back, in the part you can't see from the road. Back toward us. That's why I became afraid."

My father glanced at my uncle. "What was that, Leah?"

She appealed to my mother. "Miriam, I think you know. You tell him."

My mother refused gently. "I've heard, but it's better for them to hear it from you."

Leah swallowed and went on. "That corpse candle is lit by someone who's buried in that graveyard. It dances around for a while, then it leaves there and goes looking for somebody else, somebody still alive. When it comes to that person's house, it stops. Then that person doesn't have much longer to live."

My scalp had been stirring from the first mention of the blue light. Now my whole spine was crawling. My mother was looking at me with concern.

"What did you do when you saw this?" my uncle asked.

"I ran back inside, bolted the door, and called Samuel. He was in the bedroom."

"What did he do?"

"When I told him, he unbolted the door and went to look. He saw nothing. The flame was gone. I made him bolt the door again. I was sure that thing was coming up the hillside the shortest way."

My father cleared his throat. "Did it?"

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"I don't know. I was afraid to look out, and I wouldn't let Sam. If it was there, I didn't want to know."

"What do you want of us?" my father asked.

Her dark eyes were distressed. "I don't know. I want help, but I don't know what kind. I think Sam only half believes me. Should I go home? Will that thing show again and only go away after it's been to our house and we've seen it?"

Uncle Abner was slow in answering. Then he said, "You should take some of those questions to Bronson or Adam Bird or Father Donovan, whichever you choose. Before you do, tell us what Sam thinks of this."

"He thinks my eyes tricked me. He thinks there is nothing to fear."

"Perhaps he is right," my uncle said mildly. "Even if he had seen this thing, he could still be right. Has either of you ever done injury to anyone buried in that graveyard?"

Her answer was quick. "No. Never."

"Then why would this thing seek your house?"

"If it were an evil spirit, would that matter?"

"Leah," said my father, "are you determined to embrace this apparition?"

It was plain that she was confused and ashamed. "No. I only want our house to be safe from it."

"If it is as you say, you still have comfort," my uncle said. "The Psalmist did, the man who assured his people not to be afraid of the terror by night. However, I again urge you to seek counsel from those I have suggested."

Her dark eyes flashed. "Do you reject me?"

"By no means," Abner said. "Before you look to other help, I want you to go to that graveyard with Rufus and me. I want you to show me exactly where you saw that flame."

"Are you planning for us to challenge it?" my father asked, with a touch of disgruntlement.

"I want to see which is the stronger—a blue flame in the night or the light of day," Abner replied.

"I had better saddle a mare for Leah, then," my father said.

"No," Uncle Abner disagreed. "Let us take your wagon. We can all sit on the seat. I think we should take with us two shovels and a pitchfork."

"Could I ride in back?" I asked.

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My mother took me by the arm. "You're not riding anywhere, Martin," she said firmly. "It's time for school. Get your things."

I went off down the road, past the dew-drenched fields, knowing that I would hear at day's end what my father and Uncle Abner found. I wondered if it would dispel the nightmare I might have as a result of the things I had already heard.

The cemetery below Baird's Ridge was a rounded knoll overlooking the main road. Because it was perhaps fifty feet high, the graves could not be seen from below, save for the few on the forward slope. It was a pleasant place, but churchyard cemeteries and family graveyards were favored more.

My father drove the wagon up the lane that wound gently from the main road up the east slope and around to the back of the burial ground. He pulled up here, where there was a clear space. The fringing pines were only at the sides of the knoll, not at front or back.

Uncle Abner helped Leah to the ground.

"Now, Leah," he said, "show us where you saw the light."

She walked almost straight ahead toward the front of the cemetery, but she stopped about ten feet short of the nearest grave.

"Around here, I think," she said.

Abner reached into the wagon and removed the pitchfork.

"It would be no surprise to me," he remarked, "if someone had seen what you described in this cemetery before. The earth here is a yellowish clay, and water does not drain well from it. It is not quite a marsh, but there are similarities.

"We know that lights, many of them blue, are seen over marshy ground at night. It is my feeling that these lights are gassy by nature, kindled by some means we do not yet understand. The same conditions might exist here."

He looked thoughtfully at the dark woman.

"The water-soaked soil should be where you indicate, but what is there to decay?"

He moved his big hand in a sweeping gesture. The ground was quite ordinary, a mixture of grass and weeds.

She looked about and shook her head. "It's the same as it's always been."

She stopped turning her head. "The only difference I see is this young elderberry plant." She stooped and inspected the scalloped

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leaves and the smooth, black berries. "I have never seen an elderberry here before."

"The soil holds too much water," my father said. "Something must have happened to divert some of the water to the back slope. Elderberries like water, but not too much of it."

Uncle Abner lifted the pitchfork. "I believe there is something in this earth that does not belong here. The presence of the elderberry hints at it. Now we must find where it is."

He walked several yards to the right of the plant and thrust the pitchfork gently, but firmly, into the ground. Then he carefully withdrew it and went several yards to the left, where he repeated the act.

"Now I have some measure of the texture of the soil," he explained.

He returned to the plant and sank the pitchfork again. This time he stopped before he had gone very deep.

"The ground has been disturbed here," he said.

He tried the earth numerous times until he had outlined a rough rectangle about six feet by three feet.

My father anticipated the next move. He went to the wagon and brought the shovels.

Abner looked about the knoll, then addressed the woman. "Leah, there is a rock over there between the pines. It might be wise if you sat there. Of course," he concluded, "we might only find some animal."

She lifted her eyes from the marks that Abner had scratched in the soil. Without comment, she followed his suggestion.

The dew had evaporated, and the morning had gone into the breathless period which follows the air's acceptance of the moisture. The two big men were sweating before the shovels had even touched the ground.

Uncle Abner bent over and studied the earth before setting his shovel.

"Rufus," he said, "take a moment. Can you see any trace of digging?"

My father looked intently over the entire rectangle. "No, but the rains would have wiped any out if it had been done months ago."

"That is true," Abner replied, "but the turf was not put back crudely. I could believe it was carefully sodded."

"The digger didn't want this found," my father remarked.

They set to digging, their clothing sweat-soaked within minutes. Before they had gone deep, a stench began to be apparent. In the

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motionless air it was a heavy thing, offensive even to those familiar with the gamut of stinks of the farm.

The two looked at each other, shrugged, and went on. Fortunately, they did not have to dig very deep.

A bit of pale, earth-stained cloth showed. "A winding sheet!" my father exclaimed.

They worked on carefully, until the complete shrouded body of a man of ordinary size was exposed.

"Who can it be?" my father wondered. "The only person who has disappeared is Jim Franklin, Kenyon's freed slave. He's been gone five months."

Uncle Abner was on his way to the wagon. "The time fits," he said as he went, "but I do not believe that this is Franklin."

He came back with a large knife. After tying a bandanna over his nostrils and mouth, he knelt beside the hole and carefully slit the cloth at the head of the shroud.

"It is clear that this is not a black man," he said to my father, "but it is also clear that too much time has passed for me to recognize him. Perhaps I never knew him."

My father looked. The body was that of an apparently youngish man with yellow hair, but that was all that could be said.

Abner turned toward the woman. "Leah," he called, "do you still want to talk to a preacher? I think one of us should go bring Dr. Storm here, and you could go at the same time."

"I can take her," my father volunteered.

In moments the two had gone with the wagon, leaving Uncle Abner. He set to work cleaning the earth from the shovels with handfuls of weeds.

A breeze had sprung up when my father returned. Storm, the wiry old country doctor, sat on the seat beside him, his wispy beard jutting before him, his grizzled reddish hair bared to the September sun.

Dr. Storm carried none of his medical aids with him. He jumped from the wagon with the agility of a younger man.

"Well, Abner," he called, "I am told that you have found one that the Devil reached before I did."

"That is a conclusion you have come to more quickly than I," my uncle answered. "You give God no place, unless you see Him always at your shoulder."

Storm was a small man, but his gestures were large. He waved a hand with the assurance of Moses smiting the rock. "In an un-

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marked grave, claimed by none—you would expect any but the Devil's own?"

Uncle Abner made no reply. He and my father waited while Storm bent over the body.

The little man turned it this way and that, lifting the head, and viewing it from every angle.

"You and Rufus can be forgiven, Abner," he said, standing erect, "although you might have guessed from the hair. The skewed neck confirmed it for me. This is the body of Patrick Kenyon."

He saw the astonishment on their faces and showed his twisted teeth in a grin. "Yes, Patrick Kenyon. Surely one of the Devil's own. He should be sleeping in the graveyard at Bethel Church. Why isn't he? Did the Devil move him to a more comfortable spot?"

"Why would anyone do this thing?" my father wondered. "It goes beyond a prank. What is there to gain?"

Abner wasted no time in wonderment. "It must have been done very soon after the burial, or the disturbance of the ground would have been noticed."

"Ah," said Storm, "how many would have cared? Isn't the man a convicted murderer? Wasn't he hanged for it?"

"His brother, Philip, cared," Uncle Abner reminded him. "He had him buried in the family plot in the churchyard. As Adam Bird tells it, more than one objected to that."

The Kenyon case was an ugly one. The family was a good one in this part of Virginia. Already wealthy, Francis Kenyon had brought his bride from the Shenandoah Valley across the great mountains to the east. He had planted his roots among these western hills, where he established a big house, raised cattle, horses, and tobacco. He had two sons, Patrick and Philip.

Francis Kenyon was an enlightened man. Although he owned slaves in his early years, he had freed them by his middle years, an act which drew mixed reactions from other landowners. Some of those who were freed remained in his employ, others went north to Pennsylvania or west to Ohio. Many of the departed blacks would return from time to time to visit while Francis Kenyon lived, and they were still welcomed by the sons after the father's death at fifty-two.

Near the end of the previous winter, Patrick Kenyon, the younger brother, was in Parkersburg, on the Ohio. He had gone to intercept a letter from Memphis that was due on the next boat up to Pittsburgh. When he arrived in Parkersburg, he chanced to encounter

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a Negro named Dan Adams, a robust man freed by his father and now living in Ohio. They had a pleasant reunion, but Adams was anxious to return to Ohio. There were rumors that another hunt for runaway slaves was in progress, and he felt safer in Ohio than in western Virginia. Free though he was, there was a risk of his being impressed and sold on the block in some slave state.

After Patrick Kenyon parted from Adams, he went to a tavern. The act was a grave error. He was young, impulsive, and inclined to overindulge. Later, when it was dark, he left the inn but he was no longer able to exercise judgment.

As he walked down a side street near the river front, he saw a burly man dragging a protesting Negro whose hands were tied behind him. In the uncertain light he concluded that the captive was Adams, trapped before he could be ferried across the Ohio. Hoping to rescue the man, Kenyon silently approached his captor from behind and felled him with a savage blow of his stick.

Kenyon's ferocious stroke across the back of the man's neck completed his error. The captive was not Adams, but a drunken farmhand being brought to jail by a sheriff's deputy. The blow to the head killed the deputy on the spot.

Kenyon had no real defense. He was tried for murder, found guilty, and hanged.

As Abner had said, when Philip Kenyon arranged for his brother's burial in the graveyard of Bethel Church, several of the congregation objected to the presence of a murderer among their loved ones. Only the forceful chiding of Adam Bird, who served this church as part of his circuit, had caused Philip Kenyon's wishes to prevail.

"And what will you do now?" Storm asked. "You know whose body it is. Will you rebury it here?"

"This is not where he was laid to rest," said Abner. "There is canvas in the wagon." He turned to my father. "Rufus, I intend to take this body back to the churchyard and have Pennington return it to its coffin. Will you come with me or return home?"

"I will come."

"On many a day I'd walk back," Storm remarked. "This time I'll accept a ride."

He gave my father and Uncle Abner a sly grin. "I want to see the answer to the question you haven't asked: why wasn't the coffin also brought here?"

Bethel Church was not a large church. It was only one-story, built

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with whitewashed boards. It had no cellar, only an airspace beneath, with ventholes that could be boarded up in cold weather. Two posts in the front yard were spanned by a crosspiece supporting an old ship's bell. This called the congregation to service and occasionally rang out the death of a member.

The church sat in a five-acre tract donated by Francis Kenyon. The ground was generously shaded by maples, especially at the rear of the church, where the graveyard was.

When the wagon driven by my father pulled up before the church, a man in work-stained clothing came to the door at the sound of the horses' hoofs.

"Pennington," Uncle Abner called, "we have an unpleasant task for you."

The man greeted the three of them, then questioned Abner. "I can recall few tasks that were pleasant. What is yours?"

"We have Patrick Kenyon's body in the wagon. It would be a decent thing if you'd help us return it to its coffin."

The man's sunbrowned skin lost a shade of color.

"Patrick Kenyon's body? What is it doing out of its coffin?"

"You are the sexton here," Storm said dryly. "Have you no idea?"

Pennington shook his head. He was an average man, but stringy. His brown eyes were beady, but they were as wide now as he could make them.

He shoved back his hat. "Why, no. I thought—"

Uncle Abner leaned forward. "You tend the graveyard. Was the earth on the grave never disturbed?"

"I never noticed it."

Abner glanced at my father, but neither of them said anything. The doctor noticed this.

"He must have been moved right after he was buried," Storm murmured in a low voice, "when the earth was fresh turned, and new digging wouldn't be detected."

"That is true," Uncle Abner agreed. "Then he has been in the unmarked grave about five months."

"I think the brother should know about this," said Pennington. He still had not moved toward the wagon.

"Get the body out and back to the grave, and I'll fetch him," my father volunteered.

With that, Abner and Storm climbed from the wagon and the sexton walked over. When Pennington saw Abner and the doctor lift the canvas-wrapped body from the wagon, he turned away again.

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"You bring him back here," he said. "I'll show you. Then I'll get my shovel. This has to be done right. I know just where to dig. That's important. Mr. Kenyon has to be satisfied, or he doesn't like it. You just leave it to me, now. I know how to keep the people in this church satisfied."

Storm was getting short of breath. "That one has more wind than he needs."

"He might yet say something," Uncle Abner said. "He has already stirred my memory."

No more words were exchanged until the body had been put down in the shade of a tree near the Kenyon family plot.

The sexton pointed to the church. "Basin's hanging on that back wall, not far from the well. You might want to wash. Maybe you're thirsty, after all that. Dipper's on the well."

He went off to get his shovel.

Abner and the doctor washed, drank of the well water, and returned to sit under the tree by the gravesite.

"As you see," Storm remarked, "the act would attract attention now. The grass has grown."

"More than that," said Abner, "see the morning glory vine? A shovel would have cut that."

Storm looked around the cemetery. "Pennington may be windy, but the place receives good care."

"It may be that his teacher is on his way here," Abner said, watching Pennington approach with the shovel.

The sexton leaned the shovel against a headstone and sat down in the shade near them.

"I'll have to dig a hole, then fill it up again," he remarked. "I'm going to need something to keep my strength."

He reached into his pocket and took out a small leather bag. He loosened the drawstrings and spilled some browned objects into his palm. He picked them from his hand one at a time and popped them into his mouth at intervals. He chewed each object thoroughly.

"What do you have there?" Storm asked.

"Sarvis berries. Nothing like 'em to give you strength."

The doctor relaxed. "Oh, service berries. Dried. Of course. You're right."

Pennington reached into his pocket again and drew out more small leather pouches.

"I've got all kinds. Sunflower seeds, hickory nuts—they're getting a little old, be glad when I get some new—"

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"Elderberries?" Uncle Abner said.

Pennington was surprised. "Elderberries? No. Too much trouble telling when they're the right kind and when they're ripe. Not good for you if they're not just right. I want nothing to do with them."

He shook several seeds from different pouches together and started chewing. "A lot of flowers are dependable, not just sunflowers."

"Very nourishing," Storm remarked.

There was the sound of a wagon approaching. They looked and saw my father drawing up before the church.

The man who climbed from the seat was almost as meticulously dressed as Justice Randolph. His gray coat, trousers, and waistcoat were spotless, and the black stock he wore seemed to thrust his chin up proudly. His hair was a yellow mane, his nose was a straight, clean-cutting blade.

He spoke to each of the three in the cemetery in turn, ending with his attention on my uncle.

"Abner," he said in a voice that had caused Randolph to term him "Cicero reborn," "Rufus has told me the shocking story of what you and he discovered this morning."

"That is true, Kenyon," my uncle replied. "Who are your brother's enemies—or yours?"

The elegant man pondered. "Someone who has learned more about us than we have learned ourselves. Who that someone is, I could not say."

"There are those who called your brother a prodigal," Abner observed. "Such a man can easily earn an enemy."

Kenyon gave Abner a long look. "A prodigal, yes, but there was no longer a father to kill a fatted calf for him."

"He must have understood this," Abner said.

Kenyon rapped on the ground with a knob-headed stick he carried. He turned to Pennington.

"You had better get on with the digging, but do it neatly. We must have no great mounds of earth when you are through, no clods scattered around."

The sexton picked up the shovel. "You know me well enough, sir. I have never done anything of that sort. It will be like your own garden."

"Even the best-intentioned stumble," Kenyon remarked.

He turned suddenly and started to walk toward the building. "I must see how the church is being kept," he said as he went.

Storm watched him go with some interest. "My ties with churches

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are very weak," he said to my uncle. "Does that family exist for the church, or does that church exist for that family?"

"It is a genuine congregation," Uncle Abner replied. "The vanity of one or two is not the vanity of many."

"Ah," the old doctor said. "Then who was expelled from the grave?"

"You might be passing an unfair judgment," my father said. "Have you never seen the Kenyon farm?"

"Oh, yes," Storm answered. "I treated them all—Francis' wife, until she died; Francis, himself, even into his last illness; both of his sons, and Philip's wife. What you see on that farm is the father's efforts."

"Not completely," Abner said, watching the digging. "Without good stewardship, even a kingly legacy can be wasted. Philip Kenyon has not let the tares take root in Francis Kenyon's soil."

"Nor in any other," my father remarked. "He keeps his wife's flower garden unblemished by any weed or blade of grass. I have never seen so many different flowers."

"They could thank Jim Franklin for that labor," Storm said. "Until he disappeared, that garden was his main responsibility."

Pennington spoke up, not missing a stroke of the shovel. "That was because he liked it. His own place was full of flowers. He couldn't get too many. His wife's the same way. Their place is next to mine, and I know all about it."

He added a final comment. "I don't know where Jim Franklin went, but the Kenyons were never served by a more faithful man. When his time comes, he ought to have a place on this plot, or nearby."

He dug a few more strokes. "Big men or little men, masters or servants, I have seen all kinds come to this place. Angels or devils, I've even seen them in this yard, not all in the flesh, either."

He stared at the old doctor and his wiry red hair. "For all we know, the Devil himself might have sent you here, carrying the flames on your very own head. Save a life, and you've snatched one from the Devil, I've heard that's what you say. Enticing them into his hands for later, I'd say."

Storm's faded cheeks flushed. "You don't know what you say, man. If I had not been here, I would swear you had been drinking."

Pennington snickered. "I have no need of drink."

He plunged the shovel again, and a dull, solid sound could be heard. "There's the coffin," he said.

No comment was made as Pennington worked with careful strokes

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to clear away the earth. As he worked away the last clods, Philip Kenyon returned to the graveside.

"No need to take it out," he said. "Just remove the lid, and we can return my brother's body."

Pennington climbed from the grave and walked to the small shed behind the church where he kept his tools. He returned with a pry bar. He scrambled into the hole again, knelt, and carefully inserted the tip of the bar between the coffin's side and the lid. He pressed gently on the bar. With a groan the lid raised slightly and one of the nails came up.

The sexton's face contorted. He looked up in alarm.

"There's something in here!"

"Go on, then," Kenyon directed. "Have the lid off and see what it is."

Pennington plainly detested what he was asked to do, but he worked steadily, in silence, until the last nail was freed. Then he worked the bar harder, and the coffin lid came away.

"God in Heaven!" the sexton exclaimed.

"There is no doubt who this one is," Storm said.

The second decomposed body of the morning lay in what had been Patrick Kenyon's coffin. This was the corpse of a middle-aged black man, unshrouded, dressed in his working clothes. He had been savagely beaten at the back of the head.

"Jim Franklin!" Kenyon gasped. "But why is he here in my brother's place?"

Pennington snickered hysterically. "He was the better man. He deserved it more."

Uncle Abner stood straight under the tree. His head was, in truth, far below the lowest branch, but there was the appearance that the two were almost touching.

"That answer can wait," he said. "There is something to be solved at once. There are two bodies and one grave. What do you want to do, Kenyon?"

"Most of that is for Franklin's wife to decide," Kenyon answered. "I can make an offer, in light of Pennington's remarks. I have always kept a coffin ready in my barn, in case I should die unexpectedly. I am willing to let Franklin rest where he is and bring my brother beside him in my own coffin. Part of that will have to be decided by Esther Franklin."

"Then she must be consulted at once," Abner said.

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My father volunteered to see Franklin's wife and tell her what had happened. This was a trait that he and my uncle shared.

As he departed, Uncle Abner turned to Philip Kenyon.

"I must tell you, Kenyon, that there are those who believe that you place your family on too high a pedestal," he said. "Your determination to live up to your father's standards and your wife's wishes are thought to be excessive. Your appearance is considered to mirror an attempt to play the landed squire."

Kenyon's face, handsome as a medieval king's, clouded. "You confuse me, Abner. One moment you make sound suggestions for beginning to resolve this dilemma. The next moment you hold me up to criticism. What does my family life have to do with the outrage to my brother's body, and the murder of my best servant?"

"It might have everything to do with these things," said Abner.

Kenyon attempted censure, but it was clear that he was unsure of his authority over my uncle. "I demand that you state your case, if one exists, before these men, so that I can demolish it. Begin by telling who killed Franklin and why."

"I do not yet know who killed him," Uncle Abner replied. "I do know why he was killed."

"Tell it, then!"

"Because of the fact that Franklin seems to have disappeared at about the same time your brother's body was moved, I think he saw the perpetrator in the act of digging up the grave," Abner said. He did not raise his voice, but his words were weighted with conviction.

When his audience made no comment, he continued. "If Franklin had been killed anywhere else, his body would have been hidden somewhere else. Even if he had knowledge of the desecration and accosted the criminal elsewhere, it would have increased the risk of discovery if he were killed, the grave reopened, and then the earth replaced. No man wants to do anything other than in the simplest way he can that will give the result he wants."

For emphasis Abner repeated, "Franklin saw what he should not have seen. The criminal realized it and killed him. The empty coffin and grave were convenient, at hand. He used them."

"If I accept that," Kenyon said, "why was my brother's body moved?"

"Your critics would say that, to you, your murdering brother was little better than a pariah. You publicly gave his body burial with your family, but secretly you wanted him away from there, in an unmarked grave."

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"And you believe that?" Kenyon demanded, his voice gone hoarse.

"No," Uncle Abner said, his tone carrying compassion. "I believe your first acceptance of your dead brother into this place was genuine. You confirmed that when you decreed that he should be reburied in your own coffin. You made it certain by offering to permit a black man, whom you once knew as a slave in your youth, to rest beside him."

There was again a silence. Kenyon tried to speak, but he was unable to find words.

A snicker broke the tension.

"Oh, he'll be allowed to rest there," Pennington smirked. "He'll stay, Franklin will. They'll want a servant wherever they go."

Uncle Abner looked at him in disgust, then he walked to the edge of the grave. Pennington had piled all the loose dirt on one side, with the sod on the other.

"I wonder which angel will be sent this time," Pennington went on. "I saw Gabriel once, on a day like today. The day Abaddon came, it was dark and stormy and the air was like smoke."

"The man is mad!" Kenyon exclaimed.

"No," said Abner. He was examining the sod. He traced a morning glory vine to a slab of it. He turned the slab over.

"This vine is well-rooted," he said. "It is even deeper than the grass roots."

He addressed no one, but seemed to be working something out with himself. "Earlier, I thought to find significance in an elderberry plant, but that was an error. The elderberry was only a sign, pointing the beholder to the body beneath it.

"Yet it was a sign pointing to other things. Pennington's reminded me of this, and I saw again the neatly dug grave where Patrick Kenyon was laid the second time. Most of all, it pointed to plants that grew where they were not expected."

He turned to the yellow-haired man.

"Kenyon, your obsession for neat gardens and well-kept churchyards inclined me to consider you as the perpetrator of all this. Then I remembered that you do few of these things yourself. Someone else does them for you, and I know of no man in your pay who would desecrate a grave or kill a man. Besides, I have told you that your actions clear you."

He held up the slab of sod containing the morning glory.

"See how neatly this sod is cut. Even more, see how much deeper than the grass the vine grows."

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Pennington snickered again. "Morning glories are common."

"Not in this churchyard," Abner said. "They may be common in Franklin's yard. And because this vine is deep-rooted, I believe the seed was spilled here when the grave was filled in after Franklin's death."

He strode to Pennington's side and grasped the man's collar with his great hand.

"Wait, Abner," Kenyon said. "He's mad, as we have just heard, but he is faithful in his work."

"Faithful to his own meannesses," said Abner sternly. "Willing to heap secret indignities on his benefactors. Willing to humble you by removing your brother to an unmarked grave, even if the humbling takes place only in his own mind. But mad? Turn out your pockets, Pennington!"

He shook the man until the bony jaw flew open. When he ceased, Pennington reached into his pockets and drew out the pouches with a shaking hand. He dropped them to the ground.

"Storm, will you look at the things he chews?" Uncle Abner requested. He had not relaxed his grip.

The doctor picked up the pouches, opened them, and spilled the contents in small piles on a headstone.

Abner dragged the man with him as he inspected each pile in turn.

"As I thought." Abner's deep voice vibrated with anger. "Hallucinations, yes. Madness, no. Storm, what common seed gives a feeling of well-being when chewed—at the price of hallucination?"

"Morning glory!"

Storm ran his hand over his fading red head. "The flames of hell, he called this? Which will be used to burn you, Pennington—red flames or blue?"

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 591st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . about a dangerous game that some husbands and wives play . . .

The author, Germaine Roquevert, is a native of New Orleans, a former professional singer during the Big Band Era. She is now retired and the mother of two grown children, one of them a writer. Her main hobby is reading. She confesses she is one of the many who "always wanted to write"—and finally she dunit!

BEST FRIEND

by GERMAINE ROQUEVERT

Neither Bessie nor Alfred could tell you when the game got started. If they were still around to tell you, that is. Bessie, she's at the Piney Village Nursing Home. Alfred's six feet under—right where he belongs, if you ask me. In case you're wondering who I am, I'm Alfred's and Bessie's best friend. At least I was until Alfred's demise and Bessie's incarceration. I visited Bessie twice at the Piney Village Nursing Home but she didn't recognize me—she hasn't recognized anyone since Alfred was found on the kitchen floor next to the knife that severed his jugular vein.

It was the game that started it all, if you ask me. Anyway, I can almost pinpoint it to the day when their banter turned into a spiteful game. Before the game there was a real rapport between Bessie and Alfred.

Bessie was nearly deaf and Alfred would look her in the eye and just move his lips. "What did you say?" Bessie would ask. Then Alfred would laugh and hug her. That's when she knew he was teasing and she'd laugh and hug him right back. Maybe Alfred *did* tease Bessie about her bum ears, but he laughed at her shenanigans. I'll have to give him that.

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Bessie and Alfred didn't have much. Just Alfred's social security and each other.

I guess you're wondering how I know so much. Well, I was their next-door neighbor. I'm a loner, not much younger than Bessie and Alfred. I'm on welfare and I gave Bessie my food stamps. Bessie put on a good spread, she did. And Alfred liked my company. We were one happy trio.

Things were going along pretty good until Bessie found out that Alfred had a cash-receipt for a $300 television set stashed away in his wallet. He had it folded into a square not much bigger than a postage stamp. It never occurred to Bessie to wonder why Alfred always kept his wallet on his person, and why he crammed it into his pillow slip when he retired at night.

One day Bessie came home from the Senior Citizens Sewing Circle earlier than usual—and there was Alfred, sitting at the foot of the bed, the contents of his wallet strewn beside him.

Bessie stood in the doorway watching while Alfred unfolded the receipt right before her very eyes. It was only a skip and a jump from the doorway to the foot of the bed, and before Alfred knew it Bessie was sitting beside him. Alfred refolded the receipt and put it back in his wallet, but not before Bessie's sharp bifocals had told her that it was a receipt for a thirteen-inch color TV.

Bessie grinned.

"A belated birthday present?" she asked.

"No," Alfred said. "For mama."

"But your mama's already got a television set," she said.

That's when Alfred explained about his mama's eighty-one-year-old eyes.

"She can see better with color," he said.

Bessie let out a grunt and stomped out of the bedroom. Next thing you know she was slinging pots and pans around the kitchen like some kind of crazy woman. Bessie always was a noisy cook, but I'd never heard anything like the commotion she was making in the kitchen that evening, and I never heard it since.

After a few days I figured she got it all out of her system. But no. She was thinking about how long it took Alfred to save up that $300, and how a black-and-white TV was good enough for her and Alfred. And she was thinking about how Alfred had refused to take her to Colonel Sanders on her sixtieth birthday. If she wanted fried chicken she had to cook it herself, and she had to cook it for me and Alfred too. Not that she minded cooking for me and Al, she said. After all,

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Alfred was her husband and I gave her my food stamps. It was just the principle of the thing, she told me. "You'd think he'd want to do something special for my birthday," she said.

Alfred's birthday came exactly one week and two days after Bessie's. Did she bake his customary birthday cake? Not on your life. She turned the house inside out cleaning it and when she finished she was almost too tired to put supper on the table. Alfred knew she did all that housework for spite, but he kept his mouth shut. "Just you wait. I'll fix her," he told me.

Sure enough. When Bessie came home from the A and P the next day he acted like he couldn't hear. Just sat in front of the TV watching Heckell and Jeckell and let her knock her knuckles raw. Bessie told me all about it while Alfred was taking a shower. "Wouldn't leave me in," she said.

Well, after that the game got hot and heavy. It was like a regular contest, with me the judge watching to see which one could get meaner. According to my calculations Alfred scored higher. What I mean is, Alfred could be meaner than Bessie. Bessie's nerves were starting to give, but Alfred didn't seem to notice, or care. He'd do anything to get Bessie's goat, even taking chances. The upshot was that Alfred took one chance too many and Bessie almost got killed.

People in our neighborhood keep their doors locked day as well as night because there's always somebody around here who's trying to make a buck at somebody else's expense. Bessie believed in an extra ounce of an-ounce-of-prevention, so she'd lock the kitchen door behind her even when she took out the garbage.

That drove Alfred up the wall. "Even when I'm in the front room watching TV," he'd tell me.

Every afternoon when Bessie watched "As the World Turns" and "The Guiding Light," Alfred took his constitutional—a round trip to the park and back—and every afternoon Bessie would say, "Take your key." Alfred was close to the ceiling by then. "I got it," he'd groan.

One afternoon Alfred took off and he didn't take his key—just paraded out the back door and left it open. When he came home Bessie was sitting on the floor looking dazed. Her face was starting to bruise and the TV was gone.

That same evening, when I went over for supper, there was Bessie with the left side of her face one big purple puff and her left eye looking slit like a cat's.

She was taking a pork roast from the oven. She must have put

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the roast in the oven before the calamity because supper was on time as usual.

"I coulda got killed," she was moaning.

"It looks like you tied up with a monkey wrench and the monkey and the wrench won," I said.

"It was Alfred's fault," she sobbed. "Don't know when to come home any more. Don't even say, 'Look, dog, if you want the back door locked, lock it yourself.' "

"I heard that," Alfred said, coming up the back steps. "You'd think I did it," he said to me.

Bessie was making po-boys, slicing the roast and putting it on French bread. "Him and his afternoon constitutional," she was mumbling to herself.

Bessie had a way of pouring out her problems to me. In private, of course. But this time I could tell she didn't care about my privacy or Alfred's presence either.

"The only constitutional his constitution gets is around the corner with that hatchet-faced, fifty-year-old widow," she said.

Alfred was flabbergasted.

"She might be hatchet-faced," he blurted out, "but her body's white as the driven snow."

You'd have thought it was somebody else talking the way Alfred stood there gaping at the recklessness of his own words.

Bessie turned white. I knew she was hung up on Alfred and I could see she was mad, damned mad. You'd have thought it was the Fourth of July the way Bessie made for Alfred, waving the knife like it was a flag.

The next thing you know Alfred was stretched out on the kitchen floor. It looked like Jack-the-Ripper had come back from his grave the way Alfred lay there. I mean, all the blood and all.

What could *I* do?

I did the only thing I could. After all, I was Alfred's and Bessie's best friend, so the first thing I did was to calm Bessie down, and then I called the police.

I won't elaborate on the sad facts—the sad facts being that Alfred is dead and Bessie's at the Piney Village Nursing Home. You already know that. What you don't know is that Alfred was a two-timing, rotten heel. Giving me the go-bye for that hatchet-faced, fifty-year-old widow.

And here's another thing. Bessie couldn't tolerate Alfred's mother—she hadn't seen her in years. As a matter of fact, Alfred

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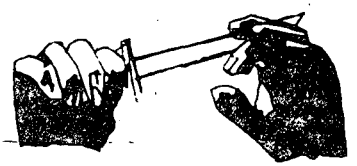
wasn't allowed to use the word "mama" in Bessie's presence. So how could Bessie know that Alfred's mother hated television? Liked her radio, she did.

So you can figure out as well as I can who got that thirteen-inch color-television set. Like I said, Alfred was a two-timing, rotten heel—in more ways than one. And Bessie, poor Bessie, what good would it do for me to tell her that she'd fainted the instant she got within stabbing-reach of Alfred?



DETECTIVERSE

SLIGHT OF HAND

by ROSALIE A. HEFNER

A young magician who was learning by mail
Cut his helper in half as in Lesson Two.
"Now don't get excited, Elsie," said he,
"I'll put you together when I get Lesson Three."

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a *NEW* short story by

FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

Picture a San Francisco street at pre-dawn, years and years ago. The street is empty. The store windows are "darkly mysterious," and the block ahead is a "tunneled terror." Every morning before dawn a ten-year-old girl comes out and roams the street . . .

LADY IN THE BLACK CAPE

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

I sat up in bed, listening. No sound other than the soft breathing of my little brother in the cot beside mine. I pushed aside my covers, cautiously stepped on the rug, scooted my nightgown over my head. Underneath I was almost fully dressed.

I pulled on my stockings, ran my arms through the sleeves of a heavy cardigan—San Francisco was chilly in the pre-dawn morning—felt for my patent-leather slippers and picked them up. In stockinged feet I tiptoed along the edge of the hallway to avoid the creak that lurked in its middle and would awaken my mother. I slipped through the front door of our apartment into the dark lobby, dark because our landlord considered it wasteful to keep its lights on past midnight.

The heavy lobby door sighed as it slowly closed. Once more, as at the beginning of most days, I stood alone in the empty early morning street of this quiet neighborhood located a few blocks from the narrow parkway called the Panhandle which led to the broad acres of Golden Gate Park. As always my heart bounced with a peculiar joy, an exquisite premonition of adventure. Who knew what titillating experience awaited a bold ten-year-old explorer in the mysterious realm of imagination? Robbers to capture, with later the Mayor of San Francisco pinning a gold medal on me just before I headed a

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parade in my honor down Market Street. Or perhaps someone would be moaning in the gutter, dying of a terrible wound, and I would be the heroine to call the ambulance, and the victim would be a millionaire who would recover to buy a palace for me and my little brother. Even on a lower level of derring-do, possibly the beer delivery wagon with its huge large-footed horses might arrive early at the saloon across the street from my father's grocery and I could at least scold the driver for overloading his horses. Who knew, who knew?

The street held no sound of streetcars, no rattle of trucks, no clipclop of horse-drawn delivery wagons, no people. It was too early even for the bread truck, the first delivery on our street, with Angelo its driver using his special key to unlock the wooden bread bin outside my father's store, to deposit in it long unwrapped crusty loaves of bread.

Up and down the street store windows formed darkly mysterious rectangles, affording possibilities of burglars skulking behind them. The soft glow of the street lights struggled feebly with shadows that turned arcaded doorways into tunneled terror. Even the lobby I had just left was wonderfully frightening; the fact that my parents, little brother, and I lived beyond it was swallowed up by the fantasies sprouting in my mind.

But none of that was the source of my shivery anticipation. I was waiting for my lady in the black cape. After two weeks of disappointment would she come again? Finish her story this time? I tried not to think about it, I was so afraid she wouldn't; that after the fright of our last meeting I might never see her again.

At the beginning of our acquaintance she sometimes came, sometimes did not. When she did we would walk and talk, her full dark cape flouncing beside me, her pale narrow face becoming animated as she told me stories, her huge dark eyes shimmering under the street lamps. Her hand would hold mine. And once she said she wished I might come home with her—we would drink hot chocolate and she would tell stories all day long. "If my Mama will let me," I had said. And she had said, "Perhaps later." Even though I hadn't yet asked my mother, perhaps tonight would be later.

My father's grocery had a basement with its delivery entrance below sidewalk level on this side street. Stairs leading down to it were guarded by an iron railing which in daytimes I found handy when I skated down the steep sidewalk and grabbed it to brake precipitous turns around the corner. I hurried now to the basement

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stairs, walked down a few steps to avoid discovery by Officer Halloran, the tall fat policeman who walked by our store several times every night on his regular beat. He had caught me one early morning, threatened to ring our bell and tell my father that children shouldn't be on the street at that hour; but he didn't when I promised not to do it again.

I waited, listening for her footsteps, trembling with anticipation. To pass the time I thought back to the earlier times when she had come . . .

The first time was another pre-dawn morning when I had slipped out of our apartment intent on a Sherlock Holmes escapade, pretending the dark foggy morning was a dark foggy night in London with wicked criminals lurking in every doorway. I had crept down the basement stairs to listen at the iron door at the bottom in case robbers were making off with my father's canned goods, when light footsteps turned the corner and came toward me. I crept up the stairs and peered through the lowest bar of the iron railing. It was a tall woman wrapped in a long black cape, walking slowly, her head down.

I flattened against the stair wall. Above me she stopped beside the railing, grabbed it as though she might fall. Her breath caught on a muted throaty sob, and I moved back to look up at her. Her head was thrown back, the cape moving with the jerk of her sobs, and her cheeks shone wet under the street light.

Because she was so sad I wasn't afraid any more. I came up the stairs and asked, "Are you hurt?"

She gasped, straightened, her dark eyes staring as though I was an apparition. "No—no, I'm just—" She stopped, drew a deep breath. "I'm tired. I've walked a long way."

"You should have waited for the streetcars. They haven't started yet. Then you wouldn't have to walk."

"It isn't that. I—I like to walk. Because I can't sleep. When I can't sleep, I walk. But—I get tired."

"Maybe you're afraid. If you're afraid, I'll walk with you." I became boastful, a tried and tested veteran of the dark. "I'm never afraid of the dark. I like it then because it lets me make everything be anything I want. I mean, there's nobody up but me, so everything belongs to me." Since she was here too, it struck me that this might hurt her feelings, so I added, "I don't mind you though. Because you're kind of part of it. The dark, I mean."

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She had stopped crying and her mouth lifted into almost a smile. "What a strange and interesting child you are. But doesn't your mother mind your being out so early?"

I avoided answering this, seeing that my mother didn't know exactly how early I rose. "My name's Tabitha," I said. "And I go adventuring every morning almost. I'm practicing to be a detective." Which seemed recommendation enough to be her protector. "Shall I go walking with you?"

"That would be nice."

So we walked up the block's incline, not speaking, just walking. At the end of two blocks she said, "Perhaps this is far enough. For you to walk back alone, I mean. But I'll wait here and watch you."

"Don't you remember? I'm not afraid. So if you come tomorrow I can walk with you again."

She really smiled then, reached out her hand to gently tap my forehead with her forefinger. "Your head is full of adventure, full of stories. Like—" She broke off, then said, "Run along while I watch, just for my sake. And thank you, Tabitha."

I ran, now and again looking back to see the tall cape-wrapped figure standing on the corner, gazing after me, until the incline cut her from view.

The next morning she didn't come, but the following day she did, appearing as a huge batlike shadow out of the mist that was heavy on the street. Without a word she took my hand and swung it gently as we walked up the slope toward the Panhandle. Finally I asked, "Why can't you sleep? My mother and father, and my Grandpa and Grandma always sleep once they go to bed. Why can't you?"

"If you hadn't already told me, I would ask why you aren't asleep now. Perhaps I like the dark, like you."

"But I sleep a lot, I go to bed at seven and sleep. But you walk because you can't sleep. Why?"

When an answer didn't come, I offered one. "Maybe you're under a spell. You know, like in stories. Like princesses get under spells until a prince brings magic to break the witch's power."

She stopped, tense, holding me still both with her hand and the force of her dark gaze. "That must be it! A spell! I've thought it. I even told them, but they wouldn't listen." She drew me close against her, my face pushed into the folds of her cape. It smelled musty and old, as though it had been packed away for a long time. "Except you, my darling new little friend. Oh, Tabitha, perhaps you'll be able to help me break the spell!"

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I pulled back, a little frightened by her emotion. "I dunno." Then, "Are you a really, truly princess?"

She shook her head.

"But suppose you are a princess and don't know it. Sometimes princesses are stolen away and spells put on them won't let them remember what they really are. Lots of stories say that."

She kept staring at me without saying anything and I used up the silence trying to think up any old kind of magic to test out on her when she finally said, "I think I'll tell you a story, Tabitha. You like stories, don't you?" I nodded. "And it will help. I mean, help me. I haven't anyone else to tell stories to and I like stories, just like you."

She urged me into a walk again as she began: "Once upon a time there was a poor little girl. Not a princess. Just a poor little girl who was very plain. Not ugly. Merely plain. And she lived in a plain little house on the side of a hill."

"A plain little hill in a plain little town?" I asked, getting into the spirit of it.

"No, a hill in San Francisco. Not exactly a plain hill but not one that was really beautiful. It was where people live who work hard for not very much money. They work so much for other people they never seem to have time or money to make their own houses pretty. So to make up for her plain drab self and house, even her plain family, this little girl dreamed fantastic dreams. Not the sleeping kind of dreams, but the kind you dream when you're awake."

I nodded. I knew all about those, I made them up all the time.

"Those dreams were so marvelous," the lady went on, "that she always liked to be alone—that is, away from grownups—so she could imagine more and more of them. Mostly she did that at night before she went to sleep. And sometimes she didn't go to sleep until very late. In the daytime she was always busy. Going to school, then cleaning their house because her mother and older sisters worked. Also she earned money by running errands for people, cleaning houses of neighbors, minding babies for mothers who worked. That was one job she loved, watching the babies, because they seemed to listen and understand when she told them about her dreams. She never told anyone else but the babies.

"In those dreams she was never, never plain. Always pretty. Her dream house had rooms so spacious they even echoed. Everything was fresh-painted, crystal chandeliers sparkled with light, the chairs and sofas were covered with satin and velvet. And her dresses! She

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imagined for herself the most beautiful dresses in which she whirled and danced to thrilling music that played whenever she just made a wish for it."

Her voice trailed off dreamily as though she saw the house and heard the music all over again. "Please don't stop! Go on!" I begged.

"When she was a little older"—her voice became rapid, stimulated by my interest—"no more than eleven or twelve, she had saved enough money from the work she did to buy some pretty dress material. She selected it by herself, secretly, and waited until everyone was away from home. Then she stood in front of her mother's mirror and pinned the material, first one way, then another, until it looked just right. She didn't have a pattern, so she just cut the material by guess and sewed her dress by hand—her mother didn't have a sewing machine. It wasn't perfect, it puckered a bit here and there, but the style really was pretty, prettier than any dress she had ever had.

"Next time she bought some material she went to the French laundry in her neighborhood and offered to work, fold clothes, iron, mop the floor, anything, if they could teach her to use their sewing machine and also let her sew on it sometimes. They did, and then the puckers in the dress vanished. She went to the library, looked at fashion magazines and books, and learned about style. Her dresses became prettier and prettier and soon she was sewing not only for herself but for other people who paid her. So finally her dresses became elegant. And do you know what happened then?"

"She changed into a princess!"

The lady laughed, an uncertain, tinkly sound, like an old music box that hadn't been used in a long time. "Not exactly a princess. But some people began to say she was beautiful. Her plain face was still plain, but her clothes and her hair—it was smooth and shining, the color of ripe wheat, worn in a knot low on her neck to show off her good profile—gave her a classic look. You know, something like a Greek statue."

This was disappointing. I had been sure my new friend was the plain girl who became beautiful, but she couldn't be. To me she was all dark—black cape, black knitted cap, dark eyes. But a story is a story and to get it back on the track I asked, "Was there a prince? There should always be a prince."

The light sound of our shoes on the sidewalk, the spat-spat of my small slippers, the click of her heels, became almost unbearably loud because, except for her feet, the rest of her congealed into silence

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as though she had vanished into a hollow of nothingness. Just gone. Nowhere.

We finished almost a block before she spoke. "Only at first. A prince. Later, just a man."

"I like it better the other way around," I objected. "First just a man, later a prince."

"This is not a very good story," she said, her voice strained and tired. "I—Tabitha, I can't finish the story now. Another time—perhaps, oh, Tabitha dear, perhaps sometime you could come home with me. Stories go better when you can sit down, be cozy, and have hot chocolate."

"I'll ask my Mama."

"Yes. Well, not yet—not just yet. And now I'm so tired, I must go home.

"Will you be able to sleep now?"

"No!" she said harshly. "Not ever." Her hand moved uncertainly to her forehead, rubbed hard at it as though there was a hurt deep inside. "Not ever!" She walked away abruptly and fast, without watching me go back to my corner.

She didn't come the next morning. Or the next, or the next. But the following week she came, turning the corner rapidly as though eager to find something, the long cape swinging with her steps. I skipped to her, caught her hand, and swung it because she was my good friend and I wanted her to know it. "I'm glad you came."

"I'm glad too."

When we were halfway up the block I told her, "It *was* a good story. All the time you didn't come, I thought about it. Please start it again, tell me about the man who was just a plain man."

That queer jangly laugh that sounded like a defective music box came again. "Did I say a *plain* man? Not plain. Never plain." As though she wanted to spread out the span of time we would have together, she turned and led me back down the street. When we were almost at our store she began to speak and again turned up the block. "At first the girl was certain he was a prince. He was so handsome. Tall, with black curly hair, deep blue eyes fringed with long lashes. The girl longed to have blue eyes just like his."

"Did she tell him?"

"Oh, no, girls don't do that. Especially that girl. You see, she was still a lonely girl and she never really became used to being almost beautiful. Lonely, plain girls are shy with princes."

"But he wasn't a prince."

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"That was before she knew he wasn't. She knew about fine clothes, but she never knew much about people. The night she met this man she was almost thirty years old and most of her life she had concentrated on work of some kind or another. And dreams. For several years she had been successful at work, designing dresses. She was always dressed in her own beautiful clothes and had become more and more elegant. But she was still shy and lonely. Then one evening friends in her office persuaded her to go with them to a cabaret out at the beach. Do you know what a cabaret is?"

"Uh-huh. When I was real little, before my little brother was born, my parents couldn't find anyone to stay with me on their wedding anniversary. So they took me with them downtown to a cabaret. It was fun. Grown-up girls in little bitty dresses with balloons tied on them and some of the men broke the balloons and—"

"That was the night the girl met the man she thought was a prince—a prince in disguise, you know. He worked at the cabaret, he was the doorman. The girl couldn't keep from staring at him because—it was so strange—but he looked almost exactly like the princes she used to make up in her dreams, you know, along with the big beautiful house and all. Well, he stared back at her. Stared and stared."

"Like he thought she was a princess?"

"Yes. Later, when she was leaving with her friends, the doorman came to the checkroom and held her cape."

"A cape like this one?" I touched her cape.

"Oh, no, an evening cape. Very handsome, of satin with a fur collar. Rose-red, lined with shimmering ice-blue brocaded satin. He tucked the cape around her shoulders and whispered that he hoped she would come again."

"Did she?"

"Yes."

I waited for more but she stiffened, stood as though frozen, her head tilted, listening. Then I heard a few quick, light footsteps and a tall broad-shouldered man moved out of the shadows between two tall old houses, the curlicues around their tops turning them into witches' houses. He came right up against her. "This kid—where did you get the kid?" he demanded.

"Please, Remey! I was just walking, she was walking too. Remey, please, don't make—don't say—"

He grabbed her arm. "I told you, lay off kids. Kids don't do you no good. Ain't it enough you go wandering the streets at night?"

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"We only talked, that's all, Remey, I send her home after a few blocks. Please, just walk and talk, that's all we—"

He turned a fierce glare on me. "Skiddoo, kid! Hear me? You got no business out in the dark talking to strangers."

He was so big and scary that I trembled, but I had to stand up for my friend. "She's not a stranger! She's my friend!"

He flung away, yanking her with him, up the street toward the Panhandle. I yelled, "If you hurt her I'll tell Mr. Halloran. He's a policeman, he's my father's friend!"

"Beat it!" he growled and pulled her faster, across the street, on and on until they vanished into the leafy, night-shrouded Panhandle.

I ran for home, my heart pounding. The sky was becoming pale gray and delivery wagons had begun their rattling approach behind the clopping of their horses' feet. Angelo had unlocked our bread bin and was stuffing loaves into it. "Hi, there, Tabby! Up early again? Bet you fall asleep at school." I shook my head, hoping he wouldn't notice the tears that crawled down my cheek. I waited until he left to wipe them off with my skirt.

All day I thought about the interrupted story. No matter what she said, even about the golden hair, I was almost sure my lady was the girl in the story. She knew too much about her not to be. But that horrible man—how could he be the doorman who looked like a prince? That Remey wasn't even a plain man, he was an ogre.

So here I was, on this later night, scrounged down on the basement stairs, waiting again for my lady in the black cape, hoping that she would once more appear around the corner. Two weeks had passed since that Remey man had yanked her away and interrupted our story—two weeks in which I could wonder not only about the end of the story but why kids didn't do her any good. Could it be something queer and catching that only kids give grownups?

Should I go look for her? Did that Remey make her walk some other place to avoid me because kids weren't good for her? That last morning they had vanished into the darkness of the Panhandle. Perhaps that was near their home. Maybe, just maybe, she would be walking in the Panhandle believing I wouldn't come there.

Never in the dark early mornings had I dared to enter the Panhandle. Only in the daytime did I walk through it to the library or to play on the swings and slides. Should I dare now? I shivered at the thought of losing myself in its tangle of trees and shrubs, in its

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imagined horrors lurking in every shadow. But perhaps just to its outskirts, just to see if my friend was walking there.

I hurried forward before I lost my courage, stiff with apprehension as I passed the vacant, decrepit old Coliseum building, and on to the Panhandle entrance.

There she was, crossing the street, turning into the dark tree-lined pathway, vanishing as its shadows swallowed up the black cape. I ran across the street, took a deep breath, and ran after her, my arms outstretched to avoid bumping into the bushes. Ahead, her steps stopped as she heard me. "It's me! It's Tabitha!" I rushed forward and caught at her cape.

"Oh, Tabitha! You shouldn't! Not in the park, not at this hour."

"But you're here. It's all right. You're with me."

"But darling, remember, he—you're not supposed to, I'm not supposed to—you mustn't walk with me."

All my pent-up worry and confusion and love spilled out in gulping sobs. "Why did that man say it? That I'm not good for you? I just want to be your friend."

Her face was a faint glimmer as she bent down and put her arms around me. "Dearest Tabitha, you are my friend. He doesn't understand. I—you're very good for me. So good. But he thinks—please don't cry, Tabitha."

"I missed you!"

"And I missed you. Terribly."

"The story—you didn't finish the story. He won't find us here, it's so dark. Please finish the story."

She patted my back as she held me close, kissed the top of my head. Then she said, "If I do, will you go home then? Not ever look for me again? We'll share the story and that will make us friends forever and ever. Because both of us dream and we'll be friends forever in dreams, no matter where you are, or where I am. Will you do that, Tabitha?"

I didn't want to promise, but I managed a weak "Yes." Then I added, "The playground isn't far. We could sit on the swings while you tell it."

By now our eyes were accustomed to the dark and it was easy to find the darker silhouettes of the playground swings against the gradually graying light. We settled side by side on two swings and she began to speak. Thinking back, I believe that at least part of the time she forgot I was a child, perhaps even a person, and just

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talked to herself, hesitantly at first, then faster, excited, as though she were watching a film unfold.

"The girl was shy about going back to the cabaret. Alone, I mean. Ladies don't go to cabarets alone. But she couldn't forget the man who looked like a prince. She thought about him all the time, even at work. All the time, and in the dreams she made up. So one night she went again to the cabaret, alone, wearing her most beautiful dress.

"When she reached the cabaret door, her teeth chattered. She trembled all over, she was so afraid he might not be there. But he was, as handsome as she remembered. Dark wavy hair. Deep blue eyes. A flashing smile that showed his white, white teeth. Fair, rosy skin. Later she learned he was Italian—his people came from north Italy where many have fair complexions and he looked more Irish than Italian. Actually she always thought of him as beautiful, not merely handsome. Like a Botticelli angel whose curls had darkened as he grew up."

Well, she might be that plain girl who was almost a princess, but one thing was sure, that Remey who had grabbed her two weeks before was no angel. Perhaps—could it be?—he was mad because she still loved the angel man?

"When he saw she was alone, he told the manager she was his lady friend and seated her at a little table to one side. He sent refreshments to her table, came to her every chance he had to talk. He said such lovely things. She felt really beautiful that night. Then suddenly it was midnight and I—the girl—started to leave."

"Like Cinderella?"

Her tinkly, jerky laughter came out in breathy spurts. "But no glass slipper! No fairy godmother. He begged her to wait until he could leave with her. And she did."

She stopped, as though the reel of the film she was watching had run out and another needed to be put in its place. Her memory found it and she continued: "After that she went often to the cabaret. Everyone who worked there accepted her as his sweetheart, which she hoped she was. The cloakroom woman was especially friendly, so the girl would usually sit with her—it was embarrassing to sit alone at a table. But the man, the doorman, insisted she added class to the cabaret, said she was such a lady. He was fascinated by ladies. By elegance. The opposite of his background. He had been a very poor boy, far poorer than ever the girl had been. From Chicago

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slums. And he wanted the opposite of that. The girl and he had that in common."

She sighed. "So at last he said what she longed to hear. That he loved her. She was already in love with him, from the moment she met him. She wanted to be his wife, to have a child just like him, to care for, to love. To make up to him, and to herself, for the childhood they never had. To tell all her stories, all her dreams, to her own baby the way she used to tell them to the babies she took care of when she was growing up."

She took a deep breath, held it as though startled by something happening within herself. Then she rocked back and forth, slowly, gradually faster and faster as sobs struggled in her throat. Her voice broke out of them, raspy and passionate, "I try, I try, I try to believe it wasn't his fault! Because he never was a child and he can't understand about children. Children have to be kept close, loved, treasured! And a mother has to have children. Oh, I want not to blame him!"

"For what?"

Her arms grabbed her middle as though it hurt. But after a moment she straightened and began swinging, her foot pushing at the ground for momentum. When she spoke her voice had a distant conversational tone. "Well, they married. Yes, they married."

"And did she have her own baby?"

"Yes. Oh, yes!" Now her voice was bright, a lilt in it. "A beautiful little girl."

"Beautiful like her father, or beautiful like the plain girl?"

"Like her father," she said softly. "Except for her hair. Even when she was newborn her hair was silky and fair. Like moonbeams."

Moonbeam hair? So how could my friend be the plain girl who had the beautiful baby? Except for her pale face, she was dark from head to foot.

"She was exquisite," she continued, almost in a whisper. "Not thin and plain. Perfect. A true princess."

Her voice broke out of control, rose in shrill misery. "And he gave her away! Wouldn't let me see her again, not ever! Oh, God, I want my baby back!"

She jumped from the swing, bending, twisting, wrestling with her secret pain so strenuously that the black knitted cap spun off her head. Under the gray light that filtered through the trees, pale hair spilled over her shoulders like a cascade of moonbeams.

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I began to weep in sympathy. "Can't we tell the police? Won't the police look for her?"

She moaned like a sick animal. "My fault! Yes, my fault! Because I was so sick. For years and years. But he broke my heart, he made me sick, he shouldn't have broken my heart! And when I came home there wasn't any baby, he sent my baby away. That's why I can't sleep, why I walk the streets. Dear God, what am I to do?"

Just like the earlier time I didn't hear his approach. Suddenly the man Remey was there in the playground. He rushed at my friend, grasped her arm, slapped her. "Shut up! You want the cops coming?" He saw me. "So you found that kid again. Next thing you'll bring her home and rack up a kidnaping charge on top of everything else."

She whimpered, "No, no, I wouldn't. I promise, she found me herself. Oh, Remey, please, please give me back my baby. I'll be good, just bring her back. I want my baby, my baby!"

Her plea lost itself in a suffering howl, like that of a dog who once had been hit by a streetcar in front of our store. He slapped her again, and the howl stopped.

"Damn it! Work my tail off at night while you run around crazy. But I never thought you'd run into kids at night, get yourself all worked up again. I warned you, get off the subject of kids!"

In a voice squeaky with fear I said, "You wicked old man, you old stealer! I'm going to tell Mr. Halloran, he's our policeman. He's my father's friend, and he's going to arrest you!"

"Damn!" he said bitterly. The dawn light revealed his face plainly. He wasn't a bit handsome. Lines ridged his face. His mouth was tight, like for biting. Puffs under his eyes seemed to be trying to reach his bushy eyebrows. He gave her a shake, his face close to her pale frightened features. "You swore you were okay, that I could trust you. But you're still nuts! Telling this kid stuff like that."

He yanked her toward the path. "I'm telling you, you don't quit running the streets at night when I'm gone, you'll go back to the loony bin. Hear? Wanna go back? Spilling your guts all over!" He whirled on me: "I told you before, go home! Quit tagging after people, getting them upset."

Her arms reached toward me. "Remey, don't, she was just being friendly."

"I know your kind of friendly," he said. "Like before. And next thing the kid's in my house with you believing she's yours, her folks sending cops, and me having a helluva time proving you don't mean no harm, you just got a thing about kids."

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He gripped her tighter, pushed her up the path, calling back, "Just for the record, kid, this is a sick lady. Real sick. Because nobody stole no baby. She never had any baby. So don't waste your time or mine telling the cops."

Sick lady! No baby!

Loony bin!

Maybe never any beautiful girl who used to be plain, just always plain plain. For sure, no handsome man who looked like a prince. Maybe no beautiful dresses, no cabaret, no anything.

I ran for home, swallowing hard against a sickness that crawled up my throat. Would I grow up to fall in love with some Remey who would yell at me, put me in a loony bin? Would I make up stories about babies that never were?

When I reached our store Angelo, the bread man, was locking up the bread bin after his delivery. "Hi, there, Tabby! Gee, you sure are a crazy kid, running around before it's good and light. What do you do this time of day anyway?"

Crazy!

"I watch things."

"What things?"

I shrugged and walked slowly toward home, my shoulders weighted by an imaginary black cape while above it floated my long moonbeam hair.

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a *NEW* short story by

IAN STUART

first publication in the United States

Martin Roscoe was proud of his magnanimity—he enjoyed the feeling of power it gave him. And it went some way toward compensating for the humiliations he suffered at home . . .

THE VANITY OF MARTIN ROSCOE

by IAN STUART

It is sometimes held that all murderers are vain. One has to except, of course, the poor wretches driven beyond endurance by fear or ill-treatment—perhaps their crimes are not truly murder—but for the rest, the theory goes, it is their vanity which enables them to put their own desires and well being before the lives of their victims. For, after all, murder is the ultimate selfishness.

Certainly in the final analysis it was vanity that was Martin Roscoe's undoing. Without even thinking about it he believed, quite simply, that with the exception of his wife everybody liked him. The idea that anybody might actively hate him never crossed his mind.

Certainly not Bowman. For Bowman was a nonentity, hardly to be considered as a person. Moreover, he was in his debt. If it hadn't been for Roscoe's generosity Bowman would have lost his job, and in times like these, without references, he would have found it almost impossible to get another. Worse, he could have gone to jail. And Bowman needed a steady job with good wages.

Roscoe had been merciful. When he discovered Bowman was fid-

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dling the books he had given him a severe lecture and warned him what would happen if he ever did the same thing again and let it go at that. Bowman's pleading that he had a spastic daughter who needed extras and he and his wife couldn't manage on his wages had had nothing to do with it. Roscoe had hardly listened.

For a few minutes he had held Bowman's fate in his hands and when most people would have sacked him without compunction he had chosen to be merciful. All he had done was see that Bowman paid back the money he had taken at the rate of five pounds a week. It was deducted from his wages, and when the staff received a raise which would have increased his take-home pay by nine pounds Roscoe increased the deductions by eight pounds.

He was proud of his magnanimity, and afterwards he enjoyed the feeling of power it gave him. It went some way toward compensating for the humiliations he suffered at home. And he made sure Bowman didn't forget his compassion, asking after his wife and daughter almost every day and dropping occasional hints that he could still dismiss him, even go to the police. Bowman was at his mercy and it made him want to laugh every time he saw the little runt.

In one thing Roscoe was right. With the notable exceptions of Bowman and his wife, almost everybody he knew did like him. He was thirty-nine, a big man although not particularly tall, with a spreading waistline, broad features, and thinning fair hair who still played rugger for his club's third fifteen, a reasonable game of squash, and golf off a handicap of eight. A certain type of woman thought him attractive and he had a way with them. Other men might envy him—he knew they did—but they liked him and enjoyed his company. Roscoe flourished in the warmth of his popularity.

It didn't trouble him in the least that people knew he had married Stella for her money. On the contrary, he rather enjoyed their knowing. As if he felt that by doing so and remaining his own man he had demonstrated some quality they should admire. Stella's father had owned three garages, a hire fleet of cars and vans, and a hotel. Or rather, his company had. It was almost the same thing because the old man owned ninety-nine percent of the shares and his wife the other one percent. She didn't even know she held it.

Roscoe joined him as sales manager when he was thirty-two. Stella was then thirty-eight. Her mother was a pretty, gentle woman but Stella had inherited her father's looks. There were people who thought she had inherited his character too—and a hard-headed, grasping bastard was by no means the least generous description

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applied to him by people who knew him well—but they were wrong. Stella was selfish and she possessed a streak of cruelty, but she lacked the old man's strength of character.

She and Roscoe were married within a year. The marriage was as calculated on her side as on his; she was nearly forty and for reasons she didn't explain to anyone she had no intention of remaining a spinster for the rest of her life. She didn't look for love or for sexual gratification, she had never felt any need for that, she merely wanted a husband.

Roscoe had already proved himself in his job. Old Pawson approved of his son-in-law's hard-headedness and after the wedding he left most of the day-to-day management of the garage business to him and concentrated on running the hotel. As a second-anniversary present he gave him five shares and made him a director. That was six months after his wife died and the Roscoes went to live with him. Then, eighteen months ago, he had come home from a Rotary Club luncheon feeling unwell, gone up to his room to lie down, and died, leaving everything to Stella. The hotel was sold to pay the tax on his estate, and after everything was settled she was left with the best part of 200,000 pounds, most of it tied up in the garages.

Or so the Inland Revenue, his solicitor, and nearly everybody else believed. There was more. A great deal more.

For a good many years the old man had been salting away part of the company's profits in second-hand jewelry. At first he had given the pieces to his wife, making it clear she wasn't to wear them in public lest the Inland Revenue hear and begin taking an interest. When she died he gave them to Stella and from time to time after that he added to them. Now they were worth nearly 100,000 pounds.

While he lived he had insisted she keep the jewelry in a deed box at her bank, but the day after his funeral Stella withdrew the box, put the jewelry away in the wall safe he had installed in his bedroom to safeguard his more important papers, and started sleeping there alone.

Apart from her husband, the only person who knew of the jewelry's existence was Barbara Wix, a rather unpleasantly sycophantic woman who was the nearest to a friend of Stella's circle of acquaintances. Stella possessed almost as strong a morbid dread of the tax authorities as her father, and as she disliked social functions she felt no temptation to wear much of it. Nevertheless, occasionally when she was alone she took it out of the safe and studied it, enjoying the light reflecting from the gold and the faceted stones and savoring

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the feel of the pieces sliding through her fingers. Sometimes she did it when Roscoe was there, to remind him who held the pursestrings.

Not that he needed reminding. Having married her for her money, he paid dearly. Stella wasn't mean. Far from it, she delighted in giving him gifts, although she invariably had her own reasons for doing so and they had nothing to do with affection or generosity, but she made sure he could never control any of her money and that his salary remained insufficient to satisfy his extravagances.

She didn't care if he had affairs with other women. She didn't love him and they gave her new opportunities for demonstrating his dependence on her. His women were expensive, and when she saw he needed money desperately she would let him sweat for a few days, then suddenly announce she wanted to give him a present and hand him a check. Sometimes it was for a substantial sum. Humiliating Roscoe was one of her few remaining pleasures.

But lately even that had dimmed. She was forty-five. Soon she would be fifty. And her life was empty, a vacuum through which she passed like an automaton, finding satisfaction and enjoyment in nothing. She had never wanted friends, but now she was tormented by loneliness. Even Barbara Wix was gone, moved to the West Country when her husband's firm transferred its offices there.

She became nervous, subject to bitter moods of depression that seemed almost to devour her. Sometimes at home she lost control of herself and shouted abuse at her husband. Afterwards she would lapse into black depths of despair, telling herself nobody cared for her. The people she knew would feel no regret if she died tomorrow. Probably they would be glad—they had never liked her any more than she liked them.

She hardly ever went to the safe to look at her jewels now.

Two months ago Roscoe had met Denise Fletcher and for the first time in his life he was in love. Genuinely, unselfishly in love. Denise was twenty-four, a nice brown-haired girl. Pretty in a simple, young way. Roscoe would have found it difficult to explain what it was about her that attracted him so strongly. Most of his previous affairs had been with older, more worldly-wise women who had treated them as casually as he did. Denise was different. She possessed an innocence which, perhaps, was only naïveté but which he found strangely appealing. She wasn't particularly intelligent but brains were an attribute he'd never rated very highly in women. Stella was extremely intelligent.

Denise always fell in with his suggestions, never argued, and

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asked no awkward questions. Apparently just being with him was enough. He was the first man over thirty who had shown more than a passing lustful interest in her—she was flattered and she adored him.

She didn't ask if he was married, although presumably she knew he was, and Roscoe never mentioned Stella to her. As far as possible, he avoided his other friends when they were together, driving miles out into the country for evenings at remote pubs. Denise wanted nothing more—that way she had all his attention. Twice they spent weekends together when Roscoe was supposed to be attending business meetings.

Stella knew he had a new girl friend and that in some way this one was different. For the first time she wondered if he might leave her. She might care nothing for him but he was hers and if he went her loneliness would be complete. She would lose even the satisfaction of humiliating him. For almost the first time in her life she was afraid, and her fits of depression became even blacker and more frequent.

She wasn't prepared to confess her fears to the old man who, on very rare occasions, served as their family doctor, and she told *him* only that she was sleeping badly. He had known her nearly all her adult life and if now her manner seemed strained, there was no reason for him to suspect anything more serious. He prescribed a sedative, warned her not to exceed the stipulated dose, and thought no more about it. Later, at the trial, he swore that, apart from sleeplessness, there had appeared to be nothing the matter with her.

The tablets helped Stella to sleep but when she awoke her depression was still there, a black fog enveloping her, crowding in, excluding everything but fear and despair.

It was a Tuesday evening when Roscoe asked Denise to go away with him. He had intended to wait a little longer but he was slightly drunk. Characteristically, she agreed without asking tiresome questions about his job or whether he really loved her. Roscoe experienced a moment's euphoria—not only would he have Denise, he would be free of Stella and the humiliations she had heaped on him. Then he remembered that they would need money and he had very little.

Perhaps the memory of Stella's jewelry was at the back of his mind. He knew she hardly ever looked at it now. And he knew the combination of the lock on the safe—he had found the slip of paper in her desk on which Stella, not trusting her memory, had written

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it down. But it was when he saw Bowman the next morning the plan came to him. Complete. Perfect.

"Bowman!" he called. Not abruptly, letting his voice linger over the syllables, knowing it would increase the little man's uneasiness. It was as if by tormenting Bowman he was hitting back at Stella.

When Bowman had seen Roscoe watching him, he had turned away in the direction of the showroom. Now he had to stop and look round. He was forty-three but looked ten years older and not much below average height. It was his stoop, his thin body, and hang-dog air that made him seem smaller and vaguely pathetic. Below his short mousy hair, the lines of his face all turned downwards. He walked over slowly, reluctantly, wanting to keep as much distance as possible between him and Roscoe. The bastard's going to ask after Joan and Hazel, he thought. One of these days he would— But he knew he didn't really mean it.

"Yes, sir?" Even his voice went down.

"I want to talk to you," Roscoe told him.

He led the way past the workshops and the cars waiting to be collected by their owners to the far corner of the site where nobody would overhear them. Then he told Bowman his plan.

At first the little man stared at him in disbelief, then, as he realized Bowman was in earnest, in horror. "I couldn't do that!" he gasped. "You can't ask me to!" Fear lent him the courage for defiance. But it lasted only a moment.

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you," Roscoe told him harshly. "You'll do it. You haven't any choice." Almost banteringly he added, "Think, this will be the last time. You'll never hear from me again."

"I couldn't," Bowman repeated, less certainly this time. The prospect of being rid of his tormentor forever filled him with unbelieving hope. He hardly dared think of it. But fear tempered his joy. "I'd get years if they found out," he moaned.

"How could they?" Roscoe knew his fish was biting. It had been a touch of genius holding out the promise of never troubling the little sod again. And he meant it.

"They would," Bowman muttered with the pessimism of the born loser.

"How? There wouldn't be anything to connect you with it." The younger man paused. "You know what'll happen if you don't agree, don't you?"

Bowman knew all right. For one wild moment he thought of going to the police and telling them what Roscoe was proposing, throwing

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himself on their mercy, but he knew he lacked the courage. And he knew Roscoe knew it too.

The latter was explaining his plan. Even Bowman had to admit it seemed almost too simple to be true.

"Don't get there before eleven-thirty," Roscoe concluded. His alibi hinged on that. "She won't be asleep much before then."

Bowman nodded. "All right," he muttered. As if to justify his agreement to himself, he added, "I've got ter do it, 'aven't I? You don't give me no bloody choice."

"None," Roscoe agreed cheerfully. He could relax now, the hardest part was over. He felt buoyed up, confident. This would be the end of his troubles. No more humiliations. No more watching the hypocritical smile on Stella's face as she said, "I want to give you something, Martin," and handed him a check. Always a little less than he needed.

No more having to swallow his pride as he took it, murmuring false gratitude. Lately his hatred of her had intensified. He would like to see her dead. Her death would solve all his problems.

And he would be with Denise. Denise who adored him.

It had rained earlier and now it was a damp night with a breeze stirring the trees that surrounded the house on three sides. Not a cheerful, blustering wind but a chill draught that seemed to Bowman to whisper of death and graveyards as it sighed in the branches and set the dry leaves rustling. His spirits sank even lower.

Despite the heavy cloud there was just enough light for him to make out the tops of the trees silhouetted against the sky and to find his way without much difficulty. Roscoe had told him where, at the back of the house, there was a window that fitted so badly in its frame it would need only a lever inserted in the crack and the minimum of strength to force it open.

As he rounded the side of the building, an owl hooted somewhere to his left. The sound was so close and so sudden that he stopped, his heart pounding, and had to wait until he had recovered the shreds of his confidence before moving on, close against the wall. Fortunately, there was soft turf under his feet and not gravel.

He found the window, took the tire iron from where he had thrust it in his belt, and jammed it into the crack. The wood, slightly rotten with age and damp, splintered almost silently. Encouraged, Bowman pulled on the lever. There was a tearing sound that seemed to his overwrought senses so loud it must bring people running, then the

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window opened, swinging limply on its hinges. Gripping the sill, he tried to pull himself up.

At first his muscles were too weakened by fear to answer the call on them but at the second attempt he succeeded and heaved himself over. He dared not use his torch now, and there was only just sufficient light for him to see that he was in an old scullery, bare save for an ancient sink and a pile of newspapers in one corner. Facing him, there was a door. He crossed to it, making no sound in his plimsolls, and opened it, his ears straining for the slightest noise.

Roscoe had assured him that Stella took a sleeping pill every night and would be out to the world by 11:15. Bowman had waited until a quarter to twelve, but it was his nature always to expect the worst. What if she had felt better tonight and not taken a pill, perhaps decided she would sleep without it and then lain awake? She might be in bed reading. Or watching television in the drawing room. True, there had been no light showing when he reconnoitered the outside of the house just now, but was that necessarily conclusive?

He had never been inside the house before but he had memorized the plan Roscoe had drawn for him before destroying it as he had been ordered to do. The front door was of solid oak without any glass to let in the faintest glimmer of light. He felt his way along the left-hand wall, remembering Roscoe's warning about the small table with a large vase on it against the other.

At the bottom of the stairs he paused for a moment before climbing them, keeping to the side and counting the treads. There were seventeen, just as Roscoe had said, and on the landing enough light filtered in through the window for him to make out the two doors to his left. The farther of them was Stella's.

No light showed under it. Bowman listened, his nerves tense, but he could hear nothing. Turning the knob took all his resolution, but he managed it and pushed gently. The door opened silently on freshly oiled hinges, an inch or two at a time.

Inside the room heavy curtains were drawn across both windows and it was pitch dark. Roscoe had told him that Stella's bed was to the left of the door with her bathroom beyond it and, just to the right, concealed by a cheap painting of a village scene, the door of the safe.

The silence was almost tangible. It worried Bowman. There was something eerie about it. It was too like the silence of the tomb. Surely a woman who had taken a sleeping pill an hour ago should be breathing more heavily?

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He knew he must use his torch now to locate the painting but the prospect brought back all his fears. His nerves at screaming point, he pressed a gloved thumb on the switch. A narrow beam stabbed the darkness, wavering in his unsteady hand. The light revealed something white a yard away, something very still. Horror filled him and for a moment he stood there, unable to move.

For from the bed two eyes stared back at him from a deathly pale face. Stella's face. For a second or two that was all he saw. Panic almost overwhelmed him, turning his vitals to water. Then, as the worst of the initial shock began to fade, he swore under his breath. He understood now why Roscoe had blackmailed him into coming here this evening and why everything had seemed to be going so smoothly. Roscoe had framed him.

"You bastard!" he said aloud, almost crying in his fear and rage. "You bloody bastard!"

Then he saw something else.

The police arrested Roscoe at Heathrow. Denise was with him, waiting to board a plane to Brasilia. They arrested her too, but after questioning her for some time they let her go. Not Roscoe, though, for he had his dead wife's jewels in his luggage. Hours later they charged him with her murder.

The judge at his trial was merciless. "The jury has found you guilty of murder," he told him. "That is a verdict with which I am in complete accord. Yours was a greedy and despicable crime and the law allows me to pass only one sentence on you."

Roscoe was still protesting his innocence when they took him away.

Bowman died two months later. He suffered a heart attack on his way home from work and died almost at once. Perhaps if he had lived a little longer he might have revealed his secret: that he had found the empty bottle which had contained Stella's sleeping pills beside the glass on her bedside table with her note explaining that she couldn't face life any longer. That he had wiped the bottle clean of her fingerprints and replaced it in her bathroom cabinet before putting the note in his pocket (to destroy it later), removing her jewelry from the safe, and taking it to where Roscoe had arranged to meet him.

When the daily woman found the house locked and the curtains still drawn the next morning and was unable to make anybody hear, she had gone to the police. Roscoe's affair with Denise was more

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widely known than he imagined and within an hour a call had gone out for them both. A suicide might not leave a note but surely she wouldn't wipe the pill bottle clean and put it back in the cupboard. Nor empty her safe.

As soon as she heard of Stella's death, Barbara Wix came forward. She was able to identify the jewelry the police had found in Roscoe's case and tell them of the bad feeling between him and his wife. He had taken care to provide himself with an alibi for the robbery—it could hardly have been committed before Stella was asleep—but the pathologist was unable to say exactly when she had swallowed the pills and there was nothing to show Roscoe wasn't with her then.

But in the end it was vanity that was his undoing. He was incapable of conceiving that anyone could hate him as much as he hated Stella. Certainly not Bowman.

"Q"

THE CASE OF THE NON-MISSED ISSUE

Dear Loyal Readers:

Don't be alarmed by the fact that this issue bears the date of May and the previous issue bore the date March 24. You have not missed an issue. In the interests of clarification for news dealers we will be labeling issues by the month in future, with one mid-month issue per year to make up the 13 issues published annually. We refer you, for verification when in doubt, to the Whole Number in the indicia (page 4). The March 24 issue was Whole No. 464. This is Whole No. 465. The June issue will be Whole No. 466.

Thank you for helping us to keep the numbers growing.

The Editors

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a *NEW* short story by

PATRICIA McGERR

An inveterate practical joker leads a dangerous life—that is, dangerous for his long-suffering relatives and for his equally long-suffering friends (if he has any). "Only once did George's humor come close to tragedy" . . .

WHERE'S YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR?

by ***PATRICIA McGERR***

Am I a murderer? That's what I keep asking myself. And I can't tell anyone, not even my husband, what I did. I can only lie awake nights, tossing and turning, and wonder if I am in fact guilty of murder.

It began last Friday when I went to the Coogan house to drive Julie to the airport. She was going to New York to spend the weekend with her daughter and new grandson. I stopped in front of the house, honked twice, and when she didn't appear, I walked up to the porch. The front door was ajar, her suitcase and coat were ready in the hall.

I went inside, called her name, and getting no answer, went through the living room and dining room to the kitchen. That's when I heard the sound of pounding in the cellar. As I started down the stairs, I heard a faint cry of "Laura. In here. Help me."

I hurried to the small storeroom, pushed open the door, and found Julie inside.

"Am I glad to see you!" She flung her arms around me. "There's something wrong with the knob. The door swung shut and I couldn't

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open it from the inside. If I hadn't known you were coming, I'd have panicked."

"I can imagine, with your claustrophobia." I looked at the loose knob. "I suppose that's your husband's idea of a joke."

"Oh, no! How can you think such a thing?" Her denial was vehement. "Anyway, what would be the point? Nobody ever comes into this room."

"You did."

"Only because I remembered Beth's old Teddy bear." She held it up. "Her baby may like it. We'd better hurry. I don't want to miss the plane."

I had to agree that the faulty knob was probably an accident. George Coogan wouldn't waste time setting a trap that no one was going to spring. But as for its being unthinkable . . . Not at all. He'd relish the image of Julie's fright when she found herself locked in a small windowless room lighted only by a dim bulb. If I had any doubt of the lengths George would go to for a laugh, they were dispelled by the sight of the chair with the collapsible seat in the storeroom corner. Peggy's chair.

Following Julie up the stairs, I remembered the last time her sister had come to visit. Peggy had been, when we were all young, as slim as Julie, but now, due to a glandular condition, she was grossly overweight and very self-conscious about it. It was typical of George's comic sense that he always addressed her as "Piggy—I mean Peggy." As a result she avoided him and usually arranged for Julie to visit her.

Last year, though, Peggy came back to town for a class reunion and could not avoid staying with the Coogans. Julie gave a dinner party for her and I went over early to arrange the flowers. I was in the dining room when George came in to decant the wine. I finished the centerpiece, pulled out a chair, and was about to sit down when he yelled at me.

"Hey, no! Don't sit there. That's Piggy's chair."

The warning was too late. Before he finished I was on the seat and felt it sinking under me. I'm fairly small, so only one side went down and I was able to get up without much trouble. But Peggy would have gone all the way through.

"You fixed that," I said angrily. "It was meant to break."

"I tried to warn you," he replied. "I got that chair especially for our fat friend." He examined the seat. "The nails are bent. There's

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no way I can get it back together in time. You've spoiled the whole joke."

"That's not a bit funny, George."

"Oh, come on, Laura, where's your sense of humor? You're just mad because you got caught. But if it had happened the way it was supposed to—" He grinned broadly at the mental picture. "Old Piggy would get her rear end stuck in the frame. What a time we'd have pulling her loose. Lord, what a laugh!"

It would have been too, I'm afraid. The other guests, taken by surprise, would have found it hard not to laugh at such a spectacle. And for Peggy, supreme humiliation. I had at least spared her that. The chair, seat still askew, had been put in the storeroom and remained there under a pile of blankets.

I delivered Julie to the airport and then, driving home, thought about her and George and how oddly matched they were. She was quiet, gentle, almost shy. He was loud, aggressive, the life of every party. Perhaps it was that difference that had brought them together. Julie and I were roommates in college, and George, two years older, was already a Big Man on Campus. Captain of the debating team. Chairman of the Harvest Ball. Sports editor of the school paper. And known to everyone, favorably or unfavorably depending on who was talking, as a great practical joker.

The usual college-boy pranks of the salt-in-the-sugar bowl, skunk-in-the-scullery variety were not George's style. His comedy was creative, usually memorable, and often cruel. Having discovered a person's weakness, he was willing to put in endless time and trouble in order to exploit it. The victim's embarrassment and the laughter of his mates was all the reward he wanted. Most of his targets suffered in silence or tried to join in the laughter. No one wanted to seem a poor sport.

Only once did George's humor come close to tragedy. That was the day he slipped into the science building early on the morning the mid-term grades were posted and changed some of the marks. Close friends with whom he shared the secret had a hilarious time watching the poor students celebrate an unexpected A while the science majors lined up outside the professor's office to protest their Cs and Ds. One of those whose grade he changed was Eileen Dar, a scholarship student who made straight As in everything except chemistry, which happened to be Julie's best subject. He may have resented the fact that Julie broke a date with him to coach Eileen on the night before the exam. But the laughing stopped when Eileen,

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having seen her false D, went quietly back to the dorm and took half a bottle of sleeping pills. She was found in time to save her, but many of us thought George's brand of humor no longer amusing.

"He didn't know," Julie defended him, "that a grade below C would lose Eileen her scholarship money, that she'd have to drop out of school."

Perhaps not. But I'm convinced that, for George, the knowledge would only have given the joke a sharper edge. But it was clear that, whatever his faults, Julie loved him and Julie was my best friend. I told myself that, like many collegians, he was enjoying a delayed adolescence that would end with graduation, marriage, and a job in the real world.

I was wrong. Twenty-five years later he was still a master of black comedy, still seeking an Achilles heel into which to drive a poisoned dart. And Julie, always loyal, spent a lot of time making excuses, trying to soften his victims' wrath. I have only once seen her really angry with him. That was the day after their daughter's wedding. During the reception I kept expecting some manifestation of his perverse humor. But he maintained throughout the dignity due the occasion and even thwarted the pranksters who decorated the groom's car with the usual shoes, tin cans, and erotic slogans by lending the bride and groom his own new sedan. Paternal love, I thought then, works wonders. He wants everything perfect for Beth on her big day.

That was before we learned that he had called the police in the next state to report that his car had been stolen. The newlyweds spent several hours in a police station before it was straightened out and when, long after dark, they arrived at the resort hotel where they planned a week's honeymoon, they learned that their reservation had been canceled. They spent what was left of their wedding night in a second-rate motel, which no doubt was worth to George all the wedding had cost him. That it put a permanent chill on his relations with his son-in-law was a sign in his eyes of the latter's lack of humor.

As Julie's closest friend I was of course not immune to his attentions. The worst experience was years ago when the vice-president of my husband's company came to town and we invited him to dinner. I wanted everything to be perfect—I even borrowed Julie's Irish linen tablecloth. That's how George found out it was a very special occasion. Then, as I was about to put the roast in the oven, a young woman phoned and identified herself as the vice-president's secre-

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tary. An emergency, she said, had caused him to cancel his trip. So I put the roast in the freezer, and with time to kill, decided to clean out the hall closet.

That's what I was doing when Frank walked in with the vice-president. He was very understanding and pretended to like hamburger better than roast lamb. There's no way to know whether having such a scatter-brained wife delayed Frank's promotion, but I had no trouble placing the blame for the fake phone call. As soon as our guest left, I was going to call and tell George what I thought of him, but Frank held me back.

"That's what he's waiting for," he argued. "He wants to hear about your being caught dusty and disheveled. Don't give him the satisfaction."

I had to admit Frank was right. I didn't phone and the next day when I returned the tablecloth, George asked if the dinner had been a success.

"Completely," I replied with enthusiasm. "The vice-president is a charming man. I'm sure he enjoyed the evening."

"No problems?" he prodded.

"None at all. It was one of those rare times when everything went absolutely right."

I left him looking puzzled and deflated. That round at least was mine. But you'd think, having been duped once, I'd have been too wise for him to fool me again a few months later. Then another female voice said she was calling from Frank's office. He had, she explained, just left for the airport to meet the vice-president and would bring him home to dinner. This time, I promised myself, everything really would be perfect.

There wasn't time to borrow a tablecloth or cook a roast. But I took steaks out of the freezer, set the table with our best china, and was waiting in my new hostess gown when Frank came home alone. As soon as he looked at me and said, "What's up? Are we having company?" I knew that George had struck again.

So I had a long accumulation of vengeful feelings when I met George in the drugstore at noon on the Sunday after Julie left. But I greeted him politely and asked if he'd heard from her.

"She phoned last night," he answered. "She'll be back this evening."

"Are you meeting her plane?"

"No. There's a flight that gets in at five and another at eight. She

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wasn't sure which one she'll make, so she'll take a taxi from the airport."

"I see." My next words were unplanned, almost involuntary. "It will be good to see Peggy again."

"Peggy?" He frowned. "Where are you going to see her?"

"At your house. We're invited for dinner tomorrow. Didn't you know?" The lie slid out as easily as if I'd worked on it for a week. "Peggy's meeting Julie in New York and coming back with her."

"Funny. She didn't say anything to me about it."

"Maybe it's supposed to be a surprise. I shouldn't have told you."

"I'm glad you did." His eyes narrowed in a calculating expression while his lips curved as at a private joke. "Very glad. I wouldn't want old Piggy to arrive without a proper welcome."

He left the drugstore, and watching him hurry to his car, I smiled at my own private joke. He'll go home, I told myself, and fix that chair for Peggy to sit on at tomorrow's dinner. I bought the ice cream I had come for and on the way home unreeled a mental movie of what was about to happen in the Coogan house.

George will go into the storeroom. The door will swing shut behind him. He'll take the blankets off the chair and nail the collapsible seat back in place. Then he'll discover that the knob won't turn and he can't get out of the storeroom. If Julie catches the five o'clock plane, she'll get home and let him out about six. I hope she takes the eight o'clock instead. That will give him three extra hours to ponder what it's like to be on the wrong side of a practical joke.

He won't know it's a trick, though, while he's in there. He'll think it was just bad luck that the door stuck. But when Julie opens the door and Peggy isn't with her, he'll know I lied to him. And when she tells him that I came and found her locked in on Friday, he'll see the whole picture. Oh, I hope he calls me! I rehearsed my response to strike just the right note of patronizing surprise.

"Why are you so mad, George? I thought you always enjoyed a joke. Or does it have to be on somebody else? Come on, George, where's your sense of humor?"

I didn't mention it to Frank. It was possible that George wouldn't go near the storeroom. In that case I'd be stuck with trying to explain why I'd told him Peggy was coming and it would be easier if no one else know that my trick had misfired. I was almost certain it would work, though. George had been so disappointed when I ruined his chair the first time. It was unlikely he could resist a second chance to use it. I had a most pleasurable afternoon.

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"Why are you humming Gilbert and Sullivan?" Frank asked when I was putting dinner on the table.

"Am I?" The tune, I realized, was to the words; And let the punishment fit the crime, the punishment fit the crime.

The phone rang twice that evening. Each time I ran to answer. Both times it was for Frank.

"Why are you so edgy?" he asked after the second one. "You expecting a call?"

"Not really. But Julie's due back from New York and I thought she might call to tell me about her trip."

By the time we went to bed I had decided there was a good reason for George's not calling. In order to accuse me, he'd have to explain to Julie how he had planned to mortify her sister. Better wait until the next day and phone me from his office. Then on Monday when no call came I concluded that, as an experienced prankster, he must know that the victim's fury crowned the jest. As I had done after our ruined dinner party, he meant to deprive me of that satisfaction.

But he couldn't keep me from finding out that the trick had worked. Julie would tell me about finding him in the storeroom. I tried to reach her a couple of times that morning but got no answer. She was, I assumed, out shopping.

I went to a luncheon that lasted most of the afternoon, so I didn't have much time to think about George. Anyway, the flavor was beginning to wear off and what I thought on Sunday was comic inspiration began to appear as childish buffoonery. What was the use of getting even with George if to do it I had to sink to his level? I also began to worry that George had told Julie what I had done and she too was angry with me.

Then at last on Monday evening she called. Her first words startled me.

"Laura, have you heard from George? Do you have any idea where he is?"

"No, I haven't seen him since yesterday."

"Was he all right? Did he say anything about going away?"

"He was fine. Julie, what's happened? Where are you?"

"In New York. At Beth's. And George is missing."

"Why did you go back to New York?"

"I never left. We had a collision on the way to the airport. Nothing serious, but Beth sprained her wrist. So I stayed on to help with the baby."

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"You didn't come home last night?" I felt myself grow numb. "Did you let George know?"

"He didn't answer the phone. I thought he'd probably gone out to dinner, so I called the Petersons next door. They put a note in the mail slot last night and it's still there. Today I phoned his office and—oh, Laura, his secretary told me he hadn't come in or been in touch at all. And the Petersons say his car is in the garage. Can you go over there—you know where I hide the back-door key—and make sure he's all right? I'm so afraid he's had another heart attack."

"*Another* attack?"

"Yes, he had one in the spring. He didn't want people to know there was anything wrong with him. But if he's there now, alone, unable to get help—"

"We'll go right away, Julie."

"And you'll let me know?"

"Of course. Don't worry."

I went back to the living room where Frank was reading the evening paper and told him what Julie had said.

"Oh, Lord." He put the paper down reluctantly. "It's probably one of his games. That's like George, to get Julie and the whole neighborhood upset."

"I expect it is." Let it be, I prayed. Let it be a game. "But we've got to check. She's very worried."

So we put on our coats and drove over. The house was dark, the car in the garage. I found the key and we let ourselves into the kitchen and turned on the light.

"Hey, George!" Frank shouted. "Are you here, George? Whatever you're playing at, the joke's over."

He went through to the front of the house and up to the second floor. The bedroom was the logical place to look. But I stayed in the kitchen, staring at the door to the cellar. I think I knew what I would find before I started down the stairs.

He was lying on the storeroom floor beside Peggy's chair. The stale air combined with his efforts to break down the door had, according to the later medical report, brought on a massive heart attack. The time of death was estimated as soon after midnight. That, I suppose, is when he gave up hope of Julie's hearing his cries and coming to let him out.

The funeral was yesterday. Beth, with her wrist still bandaged, and her husband and baby are staying with Julie. Peggy is there

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too. I'm glad Julie has plenty of family, because I find it hard to face her. The worst moment was when she first came back to town.

"It's all my fault, Laura," she told me. "I knew the knob was broken. I should have told George, warned him to stay out of the room until it was fixed. I just didn't think."

"Why should you have?" I put my arms around her. "You mustn't blame yourself. The room is full of junk. There was no reason for George to go in there."

"That's what I don't understand. Why was he there, Laura?"

"That's something," I answered, "that nobody will ever know."

Nobody but me. If only I could stop picturing his last hours when it was long past time for Julie's return, with the oxygen supply decreasing and no response to his calls for help. It was only a joke, I tell myself. I didn't know he had a weak heart. I didn't know Julie wasn't coming home. I didn't mean any harm. But if one of George's jokes had ended in a death, I'd have called him guilty. Can I judge myself less harshly? Or must I live forever with the question: Am I a murderer?

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

by RILEY HUGHES

Her ex conspired to do her harm—
He'd disconnect her smoke alarm!
His long-run goal was death by fire.
Step one killed *him!* A shorted wire.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

NORWEGIAN MYSTERIES: From J. Randolph Cox comes further information on Norwegian mysteries, in response to our item in the December 2, 1981, issue. Though he hasn't read it, Cox believes the 1827 story by Mauritz Hansen to which I referred is "Novellen"—literally, "The Story." But we must await further information to determine whether or not it was a true forerunner of Poe.

And Cox furnished some interesting information on a Norwegian mystery novel. He recently read Stein Riverton's *Jernvognen* ("The Iron Chariot")—published in 1909—in the original Norwegian and reports that it used the same plot device for which Agatha Christie became famous in 1926. Cox found the book to be well written and still quite readable after more than seventy years. It's still in print in Norway and was recently offered by the Norwegian Book Club.

"Stein Riverton" was a pseudonym of Sven Elvestad (1884–1934). Though virtually unknown here and with none of his mysteries published in English, he is highly regarded among Norwegian mystery writers. Their society is called "The Riverton Club," and a Riverton Prize is awarded annually to the best Norwegian mystery.

NOVELISTS AS MOVIE STARS: This past Christmas, moviegoers were treated to the unusual sight of two highly regarded novelists playing supporting roles in motion pictures. Norman Mailer played murder victim Stanford White in *Ragtime* and Jerzy Kosinski played Bolshevik bureaucrat Grigory Zinoviev in *Reds*.

It's hardly a new trend; though. Mickey Spillane played himself in *Ring of Fear*, a circus melodrama, back in 1954 and later starred as his detective Mike Hammer in *The Girl Hunters* (1963). Graham Greene played an insurance representative in Francois Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973), using the pseudonym of "Henry Graham." And Truman Capote had a part in the 1976 mystery spoof, *Murder by Death*. This blend of authors and acting seems likely to continue, with Stephen King playing a supporting role in the forthcoming horror film, *Creepshow*, for which he wrote the original screenplay.

THE PURSUIT OF CRIME: An in-

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teresting academic view of the detective story is contained in a new book by University of Massachusetts professor Dennis Porter. *The Pursuit of Crime* (Yale University Press), subtitled *Art and Idealogy in Detective Fiction,* examines some of the field's leading writers—especially Chandler, Christie, Doyle, Hammett, Poe, and Simenon. Among its many observations, the book maintains that the most memorable detective-story writing in America is in the hardboiled tradition, which the author views as "the expression of the will to establish an anti-British countertradition in the genre."

One might wonder at Chandler's immense popularity in England if this is truly an "anti-British countertradition." But the book is stimulating, and certain to produce heated debate.

MYSTERY FANCIER: Beginning its sixth year of regular publication, *The Mystery FANcier* is second only to *The Armchair Detective* in longevity among the genre's fan magazines. A fascinating 56-page bimonthly, it offers articles and letters on a variety of topics. In a recent issue, for example, British fan Bob Adey reviewed two new British television series: *Sapphire and Steel,* a highly imaginative mystery-fantasy starring Joanna Lumley and David McCallum in the title roles, and *The Professionals,* with the fine British actor Gordon Jackson heading an elite squad of MI5. *The Mystery FANcier* is available at $12.00 per year from Guy M. Townsend, 1711 Clifty Drive, Madison, IN 47250.

AWARD WINNER: The University of Pittsburgh Press has just published the first winner of its Drue Heinz Literature Prize for the best collection of short fiction, David Bosworth's *The Death of Descartes* ($9.95). The title novella is about a retired detective investigating a murder in a lonely area of the Maine coast.

ROHMER REVIEW: Good news for Fu Manchu fans! Bob Briney has resumed publication of the *Rohmer Review* after a lapse of four years. Issue number 18 is available from R. E. Briney, 4 Forest Avenue, Salem, MA 01970. The four previous issues are still available at the same price of $1.50 each.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: The six-part television adaptation of John le Carré's 1979 bestseller *Smiley's People,* mentioned here earlier, will be shown on American TV in November, with Alec Guinness again playing George Smiley. Le Carré himself collaborated on the screenplay with John Hopkins.

Tage la Cour and Harald Mogensen are preparing a completely revised edition of *The Murder Book,* one of the first and best of the illustrated histories of the detective story. It'll be published later this year.

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"Q"

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INTERVIEW: PATRICIA McGERR

EQMN: You were born and raised in Nebraska before coming to New York and receiving a master's degree from Columbia. Do you recall any special influence in your life at this time that led you to become a writer?

McGERR: From the time I learned to read, I wanted more than anything in the world to write fiction. At twelve, I began sending short-shorts to *Liberty* and *Collier's*. When they all came back, I decided at sixteen that becoming a novelist was an unrealistic ambition and, as the next best thing, became a journalism major. In college an English professor recommended Dorothy Sayers as an example of good writing in unexpected places.

Being turned on by Lord Peter, I was soon addicted to all the Golden Age greats. But it never occurred to me to try to write one until, one Sunday in April 1945, I read a *New York Times* ad that offered a $1,000 prize for a mystery novel. Being an inveterate contest entrant, I lay awake half the night until I had all the characters and most of the plot for a book that didn't win the contest but was published by Doubleday in 1946 (*Pick Your Victim*). Since one of the characters stood out so clearly as the murderer that it seemed impossible to mystify the reader, I named him at the start and centered the puzzle around the identity of the victim.

After my second mystery came out, it began to seem that my childhood ambition might not be so impractical after all. So I left my job as assistant editor of a construction magazine and have been a self-employed fiction writer ever since.

EQMN: What led you to Washington, D.C., where you now live?

McGERR: At that time—1948—all my nearest relatives were here, so it seemed the best place to be in case I needed help with food and shelter. I've stayed because it's an exciting city, especially for someone who is, like me, fascinated by politics and politicians.

EQMN: You've written 17 novels, of which 14 are mysteries, and in 1952 you won the Grand Prix de Litterature Policière in France. For which novel was that?

McGERR: Follow, As the Night. Danielle Darrieux starred in the French film version, *Bonnes à Tuer.*

EQMN: Do you have any favorites among your stories or novels?

McGERR: My all-time favorite is a biblical novel, *Martha, Martha.* Of the mysteries, *Follow, As the Night, Seven Deadly Sisters,* and *Murder Is Absurd* have, for me, the strongest emotional impact. Also, long association has formed a special bond with Selena Mead in the stories, novelets, and novel—*Is There a Traitor in the House?*—about her.

EQMN: Such good titles. How did you happen to create Selena?

McGERR: She was first conceived at *This Week* in 1963 as an American female answer to James Bond. The fiction editor, Stewart Beach, asked Fred Dannay and Isabelle Taylor (then editor of Doubleday's Crime Club) to suggest a writter for the se-

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ries and they both recommended me. *This Week*'s concept was a young glamorous Washington widow named Rona Mead. Since my single superstition requires that my mystery-novel heroines have the initial "S"—the man's name is always some form of Peter—I changed that to Selena. Later she remarried, so her full name is now Selena Brennan Mead Pierce.

EQMN: You're an extremely well informed and articulate public speaker. Are there any subjects or audiences you especially enjoy?

McGERR: All audiences are stimulating. I enjoy most talking to beginning writers, which can be both a teaching and a learning experience.

EQMN: What do you find most demanding about being a writer?

McGERR: Forcing myself, even when the work is going badly and my mind seems as blank as the page, to pick up my pencil and stay with it through the long afternoon.

EQMN: What do you find the most satisfying?

McGERR: The days when words come faster than my hand can move, when characters come alive and all the plot elements begin to fit together. Also, much later, when I hold the finished product—book or magazine—and visualize hundreds of people being moved or puzzled by what I've written. — Puzzled in the best sense, of course!

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

The American K. C. Constantine and the Briton Frank Parrish have several things in common. Both bylines are pseudonyms, and little if any biographical material has appeared in print about them. Though both are capable plotters, their plots are decidedly subordinated to character and a sense of locale. They have published relatively few books, at least under these names— Constantine five and Parrish three—but have attracted considerable critical attention. Their main characters are two of the most fully realized series protagonists in contemporary crime fiction.

**** K. C. Constantine: *The Man Who Liked Slow Tomatoes,* David Godine, $12.95. Mario Balzic, colorful police chief of Rocksburg, Pennsylvania, is a man of large faults and larger virtues. Here he is involved in police labor negotiations, as well as the disappearance of a young unemployed miner who grows the early tomatoes of the title. The rhythmic colloquial dialogue, with no two characters talking alike, is worthy of a fine playwright. Purely as a whodunit, this book is nothing astonishing, but as a novel about people it has few peers in the crime-fiction genre.

**** Frank Parrish: *Snare in the Dark,* Dodd Mead, $8.95. Dan Mallett, likeable West Country poacher, finds himself the logical suspect in

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the murder of a gamekeeper. In following Dan's obligatory efforts to clear himself, the reader gets a vivid picture of his rural habitat and of the nursing home where the sleuthing is centered. The main clue is an extremely fair one—so fair, it's hard to believe no one tumbled to its significance before Mallett.

*** Joe L. Hensley: *Final Doors*, Doubleday-Crime Club, $10.95. Seven of the seventeen tales in this collection by Indiana's mystery-writing judge are new, including some of the strongest in the book (e.g., "Paint Doctor" and "Deadly Hunger"). Though the small-town legal background of Hensley's novels is featured in several stories (and series character Donald Robak appears in two), there is much variety here. Hensley seems to be at his best when he crosses the border from the mundane to the supernatural, as in "Lord Randy, My Son" and "Shut the Final Door." A final bonus is "The Difference," an original essay contrasting fictional and real-life crime.

*** Thomas Page: *The Man Who Would Not Die*, Seaview, $13.50. Rarely has a book so well lived up to its publisher's tag for it: "an unusual ghost story." It is a sort of occult medical thriller about a super-life-support system that works all too well. There is quite a bit of humor, which never hurts in a contemporary horror novel.

*** Anne Perry: *Resurrection Row*, St. Martin's, $9.95. Thomas and Charlotte Pitt are a husband-and-wife detective team like no other. Against a background of Victorian London, Perry combines the formal detective story with the romance and saga in a delectable blend, something like a very good mystery soap opera. One can imagine Alistair Cooke introducing it on *Masterpiece Theatre*. In this one, recently deceased (and buried) gentlemen begin turning up in awkward places, such as the driver's seat of a hansom cab.

*** Randall Garrett: *Lord Darcy Investigates*, Ace, $2.50. The four novelets gathered here don't display Darcy in his very best form. But the fascination of impossible crimes and hard-headed solutions in a parallel universe, where magic replaces such sciences as forensics and ballistics, remains strong.

** Montague Jon: *The Wallington Case*, St. Martin's, $10.95. This first novel about barrister Steven Kale's defense on a murder charge of Lady Ann Wallington has some good courtroom action. But when the time comes for a series of climactic revelations, credibility is thrown to the winds. One of the "surprises" is boldly telegraphed and another is based on an unacceptable error in investigative procedure.

** Simon Brett: *Situation Tragedy*, Scribners, $9.95. A similar failure of plausibility renders this the weakest of the Charles Paris series, though Brett's view of British show biz continues to be both funny and instructive. This time Paris gets a small continuing role in a TV sit-com plagued by violent death.

** Marian Babson: *Line Up for Murder*, Walker, $9.95. A cast of well differentiated characters queue up for several days and nights awaiting a London department store's cen-

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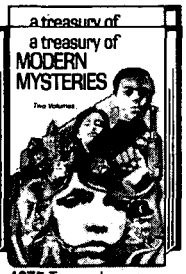
3988 A stunning selection to give you goose bumps. Pub. ed. $9.95



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SIZZLERS FOR COLD WINTER NIGHTS

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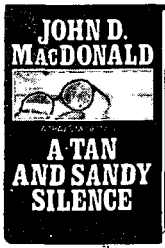

0976 Travis McGee investigates the disappearance of an old flame. 3-in-1: Comb. pub. ed. $22.40

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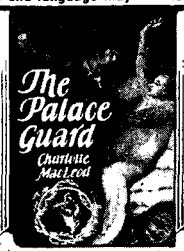

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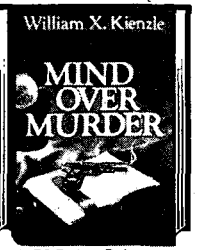

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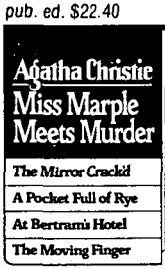
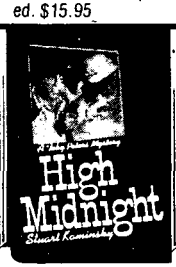


4309 *The Mirror Crack'd; A Pocketful of Rye; At Bertram's Hotel; The Moving Finger.* Comb. pub. ed. $22.40



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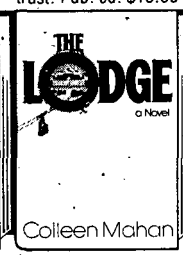

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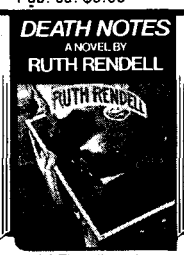

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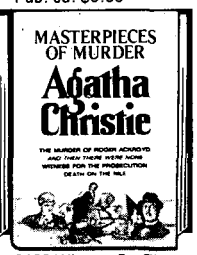

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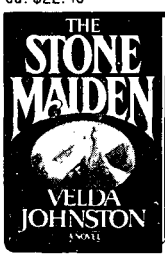

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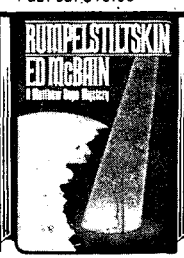
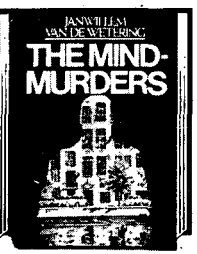
3764 *The Scarlet Ruse; The Deep Blue Good-By; Nightmare in Pink.* Comb. pub. ed. $23.85



***5017** A lawyer's girlfriend is murdered—and he is compelled to investigate. Pub. ed. $12.95



5066 *The Mind-Murders; The Blond Baboon; Death of A Hawker.* Comb. pub. ed. $24.85

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tenary sale. Babson handles this intriguing background well, and the novel is a pleasant and slick job, old-fashioned in a way that suggests a depression-era film comedy, runaway heiress included. However, the long-delayed crime angle proves a severe letdown when it finally arrives.

When you approach for the first time a novel others have proclaimed a classic, disappointment is always possible. Not so with Hillary Waugh's 1952 masterpiece *Last Seen Wearing* (Harper Perennial, $2.50), which lives completely up to its billing as one of the great police procedurals. Similarly deserving of classic status is Christianna Brand's *Green for Danger* (Harper Perennial, $2.50), the 1944 tale of murders in a British military hospital.

Edmund Crispin's *Frequent Hearses* (Walker, $9.95), originally published in this country in 1950 as *Sudden Vengeance*, involves Gervase Fen with the British film industry as technical adviser on a biopic about Pope. Puzzle-making and fun-poking are both first rate.

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"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

DETECT-IF-VERSE

by GEOFFREY SHIRES

IF I'd been smart and thought to hide
A letter in full view,
I might have shone in Gothic pride,
While Poe wrote verse in lieu.

IF I'd recounted how a dog
Did nothing in the night,
Mine might have been the catalogue
Of Sherlock's mental sleight.

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IF I'd the gift of paradox
That won G.K. renown,
I might have given you subtle shocks
Like dear old Father Brown.

IF only I was Wimseycal,
And had the touch of Sayers,
I might, with Bunter's help, et al.,
Be one of fiction's stayers.

IF I'd thought of the locked-room ploy
Instead of Dickson Carr,
I might have been—O, frabjous joy—
A big howdunit star.

IF I'd the smart house-party flair
Of that great Christie Dame,
My own gray cells might well be heir
To everlasting fame.

IF I'd had Chandler's private eye
For Marlowe, hardboiled dick,
I might have sung the lullaby
Of sluggings, guns, and chick.

IF I'd possessed MacDonald's brush
To paint a tough McGee,
I might have steered the "Busted Flush"
Through crime's tempestuous sea.

IF I'd one-half of Ellery Queen's
Dual apotheosis,
I'd trump the King of Magazines—
Not 'arf—and that's meiosis.

IF I'd done this, and thought of that,
And gimmicked bad to worse,
I might . . . I didn't, and that's flat:
But here's a scrap of verse!

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An innocent young girl from the country comes to the big city to live with her older sister—and runs into trouble the very first day. But before the nightmare started, the country girl made a friend—a beautiful wax dummy in the show window of an exclusive store on the Avenue. The golden-wigged dummy with the friendly smile became the girl's patron saint . . . Cornell Woolrich at his terrifying best . . .

MEET ME BY THE MANNEQUIN

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

All the way up on the bus I kept wondering if she'd be glad to see me or not. I hadn't told her I was coming. For that matter, I hadn't told them at the other end I was leaving—not until after I'd gone. Just a note left behind in my room: *Dear Mom and Pop: I can't stand it here any more. I'm not going back to high school when it opens, I'm going to the city. I want to begin to really live. Please don't worry about me, I'll be all right. I'll look up Jean and stay with her. Love—Francine.* And that's what I was on my way to do right now.

My sister Jean hadn't been much older than I was when she left, just under eighteen. She hadn't told us much in her letters, but the little she'd said had made it sound wonderful to me. She told us she had a job, but she'd never said what it was. She must have been making a lot of money at it. I don't think there'd been a letter in the three years she was gone that hadn't had at least a twenty and sometimes as high as a fifty-dollar bill in it. But when I'd suggested running up to see her during my school vacation the summer before, she hadn't seemed to want me to come. It was so hot, she'd said, and I wouldn't like it. And when I insisted, she finally said she wasn't going to be there herself, she was going away. But then six months afterwards, in one of her later letters, she forgot she'd said that and mentioned something about being stuck in the city through the whole summer.

I wondered vaguely why she hadn't wanted her kid sister to visit

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her. I supposed she'd thought I wasn't old enough yet, or they needed me at home, or she felt I ought to finish high school first, and let it go at that. Older sisters aren't always so easy to figure out.

I had her address, the one we wrote her to, but it was just Greek to me. I wasn't worried about finding it though. I'd ask my way when I got there, and that'd be all there was to it.

The bus got in quite late and I was tired. I was hungry, too, and I only had twenty-two cents left, after paying my bus fare and buying a sandwich and coffee at noon. But of course I was going straight to Jean, so what difference did that make?

I climbed down and looked around the terminal. Wonderland was already beginning. I had a single bag with me, not much bigger than a telephone directory. I hadn't brought much, mostly because I didn't have much to bring. Who wanted country stuff when you were going to start life in the city, anyway?

I chose one of the many exits at random, and came out on an avenue that was sheer magic. It stretched as far as the eye could reach, and the buildings were tall along it, and neon signs all colors of the rainbow flashed against the night sky. I'd reached the Promised Land, all right.

I was so enthralled that I decided to put off asking my way to Jean's for a little while and do a little roaming around first. There was plenty of time, it was still early.

I'd walked along for about five or ten blocks, bag in hand, when I first saw the mannequin. It was in a lighted show window on the Avenue—Chalif-Bleekman's—where there were a row of them with sort of tea-colored faces and gold and silver wigs. It was the one on the end. The others all looked ritzy, but the one on the end had a sort of friendly smile on her face. Her expression seemed to say: "Hi, little girl. Welcome to the city. If you ever need a friend, or get in a jam, come around and tell me all about it."

I don't know how to explain what I mean. It sounds sort of crazy, I know. You have to be pretty young, and you have to be pretty imaginative—like everyone said I was back home—to get it. If you're hardboiled or cynical, you won't get it at all. It's like some people carry around a rabbit's foot, and others have a lucky coin with a hole in it. It's like some people believe in a lucky star, and others in a patron saint. This mannequin became my patron saint at sight. Oh, I knew it was just a wax figure that couldn't talk or hear or think. I wasn't that dumb. But that didn't alter the case any. Every-

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one has to have a little fantasy in their life. And I was lonely and didn't know anybody and it was my first night in the city. That was why, I guess.

Anyway, I stood there day-dreaming in front of it, and telling it all my hopes and fears and ambitions. Not out loud, of course. And it looked back with that understanding smile, as if it was trying to say: "Sure. I know. Don't worry, everything'll turn out all right. And if it doesn't, you know where to find me, I'll always be here, night and day." It was like a pact made between us, that first night, that was never to be broken afterwards.

Finally I had to move on. It was getting late, and I had to get up to Jean's. I put the pads of my fingers against the glass in a sort of parting gesture, and went on my way. The others all looked ritzy with their noses in the air, but *mine* had that same friendly, sympathetic smile to the end.

I saw a policeman rolling traffic stanchions out of the middle of the street, and I went over to him to ask my way. It's always safest to ask a policeman when you're in a strange city. I knew that much.

He scratched the back of his head when I handed him the scrap of paper that had Jean's address penciled on it. Then he looked me over, up and down, standing there in my country clothes with my little bag in my hand.

Instead of telling me where it was, he said: "Are you sure you want to go there?"

"Certainly," I said in surprise. "I'm—I'm supposed to."

He mumbled something under his breath that sounded like: "Ah, it's a shame—but what can a cop on traffic duty do about it?"

"Thank you," I said when he'd finished telling me which direction to take.

He shook his head as if he felt sorry for me. "Don't thank me," he sighed. "Sure and it's no favor I'm doing you."

I looked back and saw him still watching me and shaking his head. He seemed to have recognized the address, but I couldn't understand why he should feel so bad about my going there.

Even the twenties and fifties she'd sent home hadn't prepared me for the looks of it when I finally reached it. Why, she must be making money hand-over-fist to be able to afford living in such a place! I almost thought for a minute I'd made a mistake. I went over to the doorman to verify the number. Yes, it was the right one. I asked him which floor Jean Everton lived on.

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He acted as though he'd never heard the name before. He went inside to consult a second uniformed man in the hall. Instead of waiting where I was, I went in after him. I was certain she lived here. She wouldn't have given this address in her letters if she hadn't. I was just in time to hear the second hallman saying under his breath: "Edwards, that's who it is. She sometimes gets mail here under the other name. I remember she left orders with me about that once." Then he looked at me and dropped his voice even lower, but I could still make out what he was saying. "Must be a new girl they're taking on. Better not let her go up the front way; they won't like it, they're open already."

The first one stepped back to me and whispered in a peculiar confidential undertone, as though it were a secret. "It's the penthouse you want. But you're not supposed to go in through the front like this; you'd get in Dutch if they ever caught you trying it, and so would we if we let you. You girls are supposed to use the back way. I'll show you where it is."

He took me outside and around to the side of the building, and through a delivery passage to a service elevator run by a grinning colored man. "Take her up to The Place," he said to him mysteriously.

"Up there?" the operator asked with a strange look.

"Up there." The doorman nodded secretively.

On the way up he turned to me and asked: "You ever been up there befo', miss?"

I said: "No, I never have."

He didn't answer, just said, "Um-um," and I caught him shaking his head a little, the same way the cop had.

He stopped the car finally and opened the door onto a little vestibule. There was only one other door, a strong-looking thing with a little peephole in the middle of it. I went unhesitatingly over to it and pushed a bell.

The kind-faced operator behind me seemed to close his car door almost reluctantly, as though he hated to leave me up there. The last I saw of him he was still shaking his head dolefully.

None of this really registered on me at the time. I was too excited at the prospect of seeing Jean. Besides, the city was such a whole new world to me that the way people acted was bound to seem strange at first, until I got used to it. That was all it was, I told myself.

The peephole opened and an eye peered out at me. A single eye,

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blue, and hard as agate. A little whiff of sachet seeped out through the hole.

A woman's voice said harshly: "Yes?"

I said: "Is Jean in there?"

The eye slid around in a half-turn, away from the opening. "Somebody to see Jean."

Chains clicked against steel and the door swung grudgingly open. I edged in timidly, bag in hand.

There were three women in there, but Jean wasn't one of them. It looked like some kind of a dressing-room. There was a mirror-strip along the wall, and a long table and chairs under it. They all looked at me. They were beautifully dressed, lovely to look at. But there was something hard and forbidding about them, I don't know quite what. There was a confused hum coming from somewhere nearby—like the drone of a lot of voices. Every once in a while it rose sharply to a crescendo, as though something exciting had just happened, then it would die down again to a breathless, waiting hush. Then start over.

"Where is she?" I asked uncertainly.

The answer was an ungracious snarl. "She's out in front, where d'ya suppose? You didn't expect to find her back here, did ya? We're open already." She snapped cigarette ashes at me with her thumbnail. "If you were sent here to work, you better get into your duds fast. You're an hour late."

I just stared stupidly.

She jackknifed her finger at my bag. "Brought your own clothes, didn't you? Well, whaddaya waiting for?" She gave me a shove that nearly overturned the nearest chair, and me with it.

"Gord!" she said to the others. "She's gonna be a credit to the place! Jean musta had a lapse of memory when she picked her out."

"Them dumb ones make the best come-ons," one of the others snapped back. "Didn't you ever know that? And since when does Jean do the picking anyway? She takes whoever Rosetti wishes on her, and likes it!"

There was a sudden peremptory slamming on the inside door, the one across the way from where I had come in, and they froze to silence. A man's voice called through: "Come on, you tramps in there, get going! Three of the tables need pepping up."

They jumped like trained seals through paper hoops, jostling each other in their eagerness to be the first out. The blur of noise rose sharply with the opening of the door. A phrase came through it.

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"Twenny-one—red!" And then someone said, "Whee!" A minute later the door had closed again and I was alone.

A human being can be in a situation in which she never was before, and her instincts will tell her what her experience cannot. That happened to me now. They'd just called me dumb, and I was dumb. I didn't know the first thing about this place. I'd never been in one like it before. And yet I knew instinctively I didn't like it here. I wanted to get out without even waiting to see Jean. Something told me to. Something told me not to stay a minute longer.

It wasn't those three girls so much. Their bark was worse than their bite. It was something about the sound of that voice that had come through the door just now. There had been something evil in it. It was the sort of voice you hear in secret places, where secret things are done that never see the light of day. I remembered now the way the cop and the elevator operator had both shaken their heads. They'd known. They'd known something about this place.

There was no one in there with me at the moment, no one to stop me. All I had to do was take the chains off that door, slip out the way I'd come in, ring for the rear elevator. Then I remembered I only had twenty-two cents. But even that wasn't enough to keep me here. I could telephone Jean from outside and ask her to come out and meet me.

I had my hand out to the first chain, trying to get it out of its socket without making any noise, when I heard my name called in a frightened whisper behind me.

"Francie!"

Jean was standing in the opposite doorway. She came in quickly and locked the door behind her. There was something sick and choked in her voice. "They told me there was somebody back here asking for me—but you're the last person I expected to see!"

She had diamonds on her wrists and at her throat, and flowers in her hair, and champagne on her breath. She was old. Golden-haired and beautiful, and yet somehow old and tired-looking. Not like when she'd left home.

Her voice was a hiss of terror, like air whistling out of a punctured tire. "What got into you to do this? Why did you come here of all places? This is the last place on earth you should have come!"

"Why? I only wanted to see you."

She evidently didn't have time to explain. "Quick! Has anyone seen you?"

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"Only those three girls—"

"I can shut them up. They work under me. Come on, get out of here fast!"

"But Jean. I came here to stay with you, to live with you."

"You don't know what you're saying! Stop arguing, someone may come in here any minute. I want you to take the next bus and go back home. I'd take you down and put you on it myself, only I can't leave here right now—"

"But Jean, I have only twenty-two cents."

She bent over, fumbled frantically with the side of her stocking, thrust a crumpled bill into my hand. It wasn't a twenty, it wasn't even a fifty this time. It was a hundred-dollar bill. I'd never seen one before. I didn't want the money, I wanted to stay. Not here in this place, but in the city. Now that she was with me, I wasn't frightened any more.

But she was pushing me toward the door through which I'd come in. She wouldn't listen to my protests. We never got to it. A muted buzzer sounded somewhere over our heads. It wasn't any louder than the sound a trapped fly makes in a bottle, but it made us both jump. And at the same instant the knob on the inner door that Jean had locked behind her began to rotate viciously. That same voice as before, the one that had sent cold chills through me, rasped angrily: "Jean, what're you doing in there? What's this door locked for? I need you out here—fast."

"Rosetti," she whispered sickly. "If he ever sees you—" Her grasp on my wrist was ice-cold.

She pulled me toward the side of the room so suddenly that I nearly went off-balance. There was a sort of built-in wardrobe occupying the entire side, with sliding doors that sheathed into one another. She clawed two of them apart, thrust me in against a welter of gold and tinsel dresses, then drew them together again. There was room enough to stand upright. Her panting, parting instructions came through the hair-breadth crack that remained.

"Stay in there until the coast is clear, then get out of here as fast as you can! If anyone should slide the doors open to take anything out, don't lose your head—shift with the doors and you'll be all right! Don't wait for me to come back, I mayn't be able to—"

I heard the sound she made unlocking the door, heard him bawling her out. "Take it easy, Rosetti. I had a run in my stocking," I heard her say placatingly.

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I put my eye to the crack and got a look at him—or at least, a vertical strip of his face. He looked just like his voice had sounded.

"We're taking Masters into the argument room. Do a number and do it noisy, hear me? All *ta-ra*."

"Now?" she gasped, "with a place full of people?"

"That's what you're here for. Do your Western number." He gave one of the wardrobe doors I was behind a fling. I quailed, but managed to shift noiselessly behind it, out of the light that slipped in. I saw Jean's bediamonded arm come plunging into the opening, take down a two-gallon cowboy hat from the shelf. Then she looped a lariat around her wrist, went over to a drawer, and took out a pistol.

Her face was very pale under the rouge. So was his, but for a different reason—not fear but malice.

She poised in the open doorway a minute. He signaled some musicians and they started an introduction. She gave her lariat a preliminary twirl, screeched "Yippee!" and shot the pistol into the air. Then she moved out of sight.

He closed the door after her, but stayed inside. He crossed swiftly to the outer door, the one that led to the service elevator, opened it, and let in a laundryman and his assistant, carrying an immense basket full of wash between them.

"Leave it here," he said. "Be ready for you in about ten minutes."

They went out again and he closed the door after them. Then he turned around and went out the other way. I saw his hand starting to grope into his coat as he pulled the door shut after him, as if he was taking out something. I heard somebody who must have been standing right outside waiting for him ask: "All set, boss?"

"All set," he answered, and then the door closed.

I waited a minute to make sure he wouldn't come back, and then edged out of the closet. Outside, in the distance, you could hear Jean's gun shots go off every once in a while. I opened the peephole on the outside door and looked through. The laundrymen were leaning back against the wall out there in the service passageway, waiting to take away the wash. I was wondering whether I should risk it and let myself out while they were there—whether they'd stop me—when without any warning the door behind me was flung open and a drunk came wavering in. He pulled the door shut behind him and leaned against it for a moment, as if trying to regain sufficient strength to go on.

He was a man in his early fifties, very handsome, with silvery

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hair. His collar and dress-tie were a little askew, the way a drunk's usually are. He'd had a flower in his buttonhole, but all the petals had fallen off, just the stem was left.

I was too frightened to move for a minute, just stood there staring stupidly at him. He didn't see me—he didn't seem to see anything. He forced himself away from the door that he had used to support him, came on toward where I was. I edged out of the way. Even then he didn't seem to be aware of me. His eyes had a fixed, glassy look and he walked in a funny trailing way, as though his feet were too heavy to lift.

He was holding a bunched handkerchief to his chest, over the seam of his shirt, and he kept giving a dry little cough. It seemed impossible that he hadn't seen me, but his eyes gave no sign, so I scuttled back behind the sliding wardrobe doors where I'd come from, and narrowed them once more to a crack, watching him fearfully through the slit.

His knees were starting to dip under him, but he kept on with painful, stubborn slowness toward that outer door, moving like a deepsea diver under many fathoms of water. It didn't look as though he'd ever get there. He never did.

Suddenly Rosetti's voice sounded behind him. He had come in with two other men. One of them closed the door behind him, locked it this time, and sealed it with his shoulder-blades in an indolent lounge.

"Trying to find your way out?" Rosetti purred. "This is the way out."

Flame slashed from his hand, a thunderclap exploded in the room, and the drunk was suddenly flat and still.

The man holding up the door chuckled, "No wonder he couldn't make it, all the lead he was carrying with him. I bet he gained twenty pounds in the last five minutes."

Rosetti opened the outside door, hitched his head. "Hey! The wash is ready!"

The laundrymen came in, picked up the big basket between them and dumped its contents all over the floor. A lot of towels and sheets and things came spilling out. They opened one of the sheets to its full width and rolled the "drunk" into the middle of it. Then they took his legs and forced them over until they touched his head, doubling him in two. Then they tied the four corners of the sheet together, into a big lumpy bundle. They put some of the landry back into the basket, thrust the big bundle in the middle, and wedged

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some more down on top of it. When they got all through it didn't look much fuller than before, maybe a little plumper in the middle, that was all.

Rosetti looked it over. Then I heard him say, "There's a little starting to come through over on the side here. Jam a couple more towels in to soak it up. And don't forget the bricks when you get to the end of your route."

Then he sat contentedly back on the edge of the girls' dressing-table, swinging one leg back and forth. He took out a little stick of sandpaper and meticulously rubbed it back and forth over one nail, and blew on it.

"D'ya think anyone saw him come in?" one of the others asked.

Rosetti went to work on a second nail. "Sure, everybody saw him come in. And nobody saw him go out again, for sure. And it still don't mean a thing. Because nobody saw this part of it, what happened to him in between. I'll be the first one to go down to headquarters to answer their questions—before they even have time to call me. That's the kind of a public-spirited citizen I am!"

The three of them laughed.

Someone tried the doorknob from the outside just then and the one blocking it called out cheerfully: "Have to wait a few minutes, girls. We're holding a stag party in here."

The laundrymen were ready to go now, with their enormous burden suspended between them, shoulder to shoulder. One of Rosetti's two men accommodatingly opened the outside door for them. "Heavy wash tonight," one of them gasped as they staggered out.

"Sure," was the grinning answer, "we're dirty people up here. Didn't you know that?"

They closed the back door after them and put up all the chains. I was fighting to stay on my feet—at least, until they got out and went back where they'd come from. My head was swimming and my eyes were blurred; I was all weak at the knees; and I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to hold out and they'd hear me go down. I knew what was doing it, and it wasn't lack of air. The city hadn't taken long to teach me things. I knew I'd just seen a man killed before my very eyes.

I kept swaying from side to side like a pendulum, and each time braking my fall by clutching at one of the dresses hanging behind me. They were opening the door now—in another minute they'd be gone. But I keeled over first.

Maybe the noise from outside covered it, I don't know. They must

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have been clapping for Jean's number about then. I went down sideways into the narrow little trough I was standing in, and a lot of soft things came piling down on top of me, and everything went dark.

It seemed only a minute later that the sliding doors split open and light shone in on me once more. Jean was bending over me, helping me up. She had a street coat on now. She looked haggard. "I'm going to take you out with me," she whispered. "Lean on me."

The humming noise from outside had stopped now; there was a stony silence. She touched some cologne-water to my temple and it stung unexpectedly. I felt it and there was a welt there. "What happened?" I asked dazedly. "Did I do that when I fell?"

"No, I had to do that, with a slipper heel, when you started to come to—with those three she-rats in here big as life. You'll never know what I've been through for the past half-hour or so! Luckily, I had a hunch something was wrong, and came back here just before the rest did. I couldn't get you out unconscious the way you were, and any minute I was afraid you'd come to and give yourself away. Every time one of them wanted something from back here, I'd jump and get it for her—they must have thought I was crazy. When I saw you starting to stir, I had to hit you, to keep you quiet until they got out of here. I told them I saw a bug on the closet floor.

"Come on, the girls have gone home and the place has closed up for the night. The men are in the office counting up the take. Hurry up, before they miss me."

We staggered over to the back door together, and she started loosening the chains.

"I'm all right now," I said weakly. "I guess it was too stuffy in there."

We were out in the service passage now. She looked at me as if she didn't believe me. "What'd you see?" she asked sharply. "Are you sure it wasn't anything you saw while you were in there?"

Somehow I couldn't bring myself to talk about it, even to her. "Nothing," I said.

Riding down in the back elevator she turned aside, fumbled some more with her stocking, brought out another hundred-dollar bill. "Jimmy," she said, handing it to the operator, "you never saw this girl come here tonight."

"What girl?" he asked, when he was able to get his breath back.

"That's it exactly," she nodded, satisfied.

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She took me somewhere to get some coffee to brace me up. Mostly, I guess, she tried to talk me into going back home. But nothing she could say had any effect on me. You know how it is when you're eighteen.

"No," I said. "I'm staying. If I can't stay with you, then I'll stay on my own."

She sighed. "I was like that once, too. That's why I wish you'd listen to me and go home. I don't want what happened to me to happen to you."

"What happened to you?"

She didn't answer.

"What was that place up there?" I asked curiously.

"Forget you were ever up there. Stay if you must, but promise me one thing—that you'll never go near there again. I'll find a furnished room for you and come around to see you whenever I can. And Francie"—her hand covered mine in desperate appeal for a moment—"if you did see something you shouldn't have up there tonight, don't ever open your mouth about it, don't ever mention it to a living soul—for both our sakes, yours and mine as well. Try to forget about it, that's the best way. I've seen things too, from time to time, that I've had to forget about."

"Why don't you leave there, Jean?"

"I can't." She gave a wry smile. "I'm a little tired, and a whole lot disillusioned, but I still—want to go on living for a while."

I just sucked in my breath and looked at her when I heard that.

Late as it was, we went looking for a room then and there. I had to stay some place, and although she didn't say so, it was obvious that Jean lived right up there in that penthouse, as a sort of permanent resident-manager to look after Rosetti's interests.

We took a cab to save time on our quest, and passed Chalif-Bleekman's on our way. I looked out and thought, "There's my mascot." The lights in the shop window had gone out long ago, but you could still make out the mannequins, like ghosts in the dim shine of the streetlights. I asked her about the store.

"I used to work there when I first came here," she told me. "I'll take you in with me tomorrow; maybe I can get you a job there."

She found a room without much trouble. It was too late at night to be very choosey, and I was too dead-tired to care. Anything would have looked good to me by then.

The last thing she said was: "Now if you did see something, erase

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it from your mind. Always remember, there's nothing you and I can do about it. We're up against something that's too big for us."

To the end I couldn't bring myself to admit it to her. "No, I didn't see anything," I reiterated.

She knew I was lying, and I knew she knew. I heard her light step go down the stairs, and the taxi that had waited for her below drove off. Afterwards I found another hundred-dollar bill, the second one she'd given me that night, under the soap dish on the washstand.

It was only when I was half undressed that I realized I'd left the little bag with my few things in it in the back room of that place where she worked.

I was too tired to be as frightened as I should have been.

Her face paled when I first told her about it the next day. "It must have been found by now! There's a maid up there that's a stooge for Rosetti. Did anything in it have your name on it? Was there anything to show whom it belonged to?"

I tried to remember. "I don't think so—" Then my own face blanched. "Wait a minute. There was a snapshot of me in the flap under the lid, but without any name or anything on it—"

She'd got her second wind by now. "It's all right, keep cool. It's still not fatal. Here's our only out. If Rosetti asks me, I'll say some stray or other I used to know on one of my jobs showed up with a hard-luck story and tried to put the touch on me. She'd been put out of her room and she left her things with me. I slipped her something to get rid of her. As long as they don't think you were right there when—"

I knew what she meant. *When the laundry was carried out.*

"—you're safe enough," she concluded.

She was as good as her word, and got me a job at Chalif-Bleekman's modeling negligées. Then she left me. "I won't be able to see you very often, after this once," she warned me. "Rosetti doesn't take chances with any of us, and he has eyes and ears all over town. I might be followed when I least expect it, and bring them down on you."

"If you want me in a hurry," was the last thing I said, "you can always meet me by the mannequin." I explained about the window mascot of mine. "I'll make it a point to stop there a minute on my way in and out."

That was the last I saw of her for some time, but I could understand her reasons for staying away, so I wasn't particularly worried. Mean-

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while, I started to get the hang of the city a little better and lose some of my greenness.

They were nice to me at the place I worked, and the job was easy, after you once got over being self-conscious about walking up and down the aisles in nothing but lace and ribbons.

I made several girl friends, who worked there with me, and I also got myself a boy friend—my first. His name was Eddie Dent. He was a salesman in an auto showroom, and it looked like I'd hit the jackpot the very first time. But more about him later.

Although I grew wiser, I didn't forget my mascot. Even Eddie couldn't take her place. They'd put a new outfit on her long ago, since the night I'd first seen her, but I still stopped before her on my way in and out each day and told her all about how things were coming, and she still smiled in that same protective, encouraging way. She made blue days bright, and bright days brighter.

I was beginning to forget that nightmare scene I'd witnessed the first night of my arrival, and in a little while more it would have faded away like something that had never happened. Then suddenly it all came back with a crash. A succession of crashes, each one worse than the one before.

I'd brought a newspaper back to my room with me after work, and when I opened it a face seemed to leap up from its pages and strike at me. Handsome, with silvery-white hair. The laundry basket must have come apart. They'd picked him up out of the river.

Well-known Sportsman, Missing Two Weeks, Found Dead, the caption said. And underneath, my eyes ran through the welter of fine print, taking in a phrase here, a phrase there. "... Masters was known to have made many enemies in the course of his long career ... his only son committed suicide less than a month ago after incurring heavy gambling losses ... Police are trying to reconstruct his movements ... Among those who came forward to aid them was Leo Rosetti, through whose cooperation they have been able to establish that one of the last places visited by Masters before he met his death was a small private party given by Rosetti at his own home. He was definitely absolved of all connection with the crime, however. Rosetti's first inkling of what had become of his friend of long standing was when he reported him missing after repeated attempts to communicate with him for the past two weeks and failed ..."

They didn't guess. They didn't know. But I did. Jean and I both did.

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I didn't sleep so well that night.

I put it up to the mannequin on my way in to work next morning. "How can I go on keeping quiet about it? Shouldn't I tell them?"

And her rueful smile seemed to suggest: "What about Jean? It means her life if you do."

That was the first crash.

When I clocked out that night there was a man standing there by my mascot—waiting for one of the other girls in the store, I guess. It meant I had to stand right next to him for a moment or two, while I was exchanging my usual silent confidences with her, but he didn't even seem aware of me.

I had a funny feeling, on my way home, that I was being followed, but each time I looked around, there wasn't anyone in sight—so I put it down to nervousness and let it go at that. The feeling wouldn't leave me, though, right up to my own door.

I'd been home about five minutes when I thought I heard a creak on the flooring outside in the hall. I stiffened, listening. It came again, nearer the door but less distinct than the first time. But no knock or anything followed.

I realized now that my instinct had been right. There had been someone following me all the way home, even though I hadn't been able to distinguish who it was. There was almost certainly someone standing out there now, motionless, trying to listen to me just as I was trying to listen to him. I tiptoed over, bent down, and put my eye level with the keyhole. Chilling confirmation came at once. My view was blocked. Instead of the opposite side of the hall, all I could see was a blur of dark suiting, standing there perfectly still.

The voice nearly threw me back on my heels, it came through so unexpectedly. The most terrifying thing about it was the casual, matter-of-fact tone he used, as though there were no door in between, as though I had been in plain sight the whole time.

"Come on, little lady, quit playing hide and seek."

Under a sort of hypnotic compulsion, I touched the key finally, gave it a gingerly little twist as though it was red hot, and he did the rest.

He came in slowly. It was the same man who had been standing outside the store. He had a funny little cowlick down the middle of his forehead, like a fish-hook, and it wouldn't stay back. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

He closed the door after him. Then he heeled his hand at me,

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showing a glint of silver. He said: "You're Francine Everton, that right?"

I said it was.

He took out a newspaper and was suddenly holding Masters's picture before my eyes. "Ever see this man before?"

"No!" The sudden shock alone made my denial convincing, if nothing else.

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes!" If I said I'd seen him, I'd have to say I'd seen him killed. If I said I'd seen him killed—

"Who's the woman got you your job at Chalif's?"

So they'd found that out. I decided to bluff it out. It was the only thing I could do. "An acquaintance of mine. Her name is Edwards, I think. I don't know her very well. I ran into her on the street and told her I had no job."

It came with treacherous glibness. "When was the last time you were up there?"

Instinct, like a fine wire running through me, jangled warningly: "Make one admission, anywhere along the line, and the whole thing'll come out." I said, "Up where? What do you mean?"

"Then how do you explain this?"

Even more suddenly than the newspaper, he had opened an envelope and was holding a charred fragment of snapshot before me. Everything that didn't matter had been burned away. The face remained, yellowed but perfectly recognizable.

Sparring for time, I asked: "How'd it get burnt?"

He flicked back: "How'd it get where it got burnt?"

"I'd been put out of my room just before I met my girl friend. I had no place to go. She—took a little bagful of my belongings with her, to keep them for me until I found a place. She was supposed to bring them back, but she never did—"

"And you've never been up where she hangs out at any time?"

"Never. She didn't seem to want me to look her up—"

"I don't doubt that," he said dryly. It was suddenly over, to my unutterable relief. I'd thought it would go on for hours yet.

He got up to go. "Well, kid, maybe you're telling the truth and maybe you're not. Maybe you're afraid to." He got as far as the door, and then added: "Don't be afraid to. We'll look after you—" He waited a minute and then went on: "Are you sure there isn't anything more you want to tell me?"

"How could there be, when I've told you everything there is?"

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He closed the door. It opened again, unexpectedly. "Armour's the name," he added, "in case you should change your mind."

It closed a second time and I heard the stairs creak complainingly with his descent. I turned and flopped down by the window, peeping under the drawn shade.

I saw him come out and look up, and then he went down the street.

A figure detached itself from the shelter of a dark doorway opposite and started over toward the house I lived in. I knuckled the pane to attract his attention, threw up the lower sash, and called down guardedly: "Don't come in, Eddie. Wait for me around the corner."

It was my boy friend. I didn't want him to get mixed up in it. When I went out to meet him, I went all the way around the block in the opposite direction and approached the corner from the far side—a primitive precaution that wouldn't have fooled anybody if I was really being watched.

He said: "Who was the guy just up there to see you?"

I took his arm. "I'll tell you all about it. Let's get away from here first." I hadn't meant to say that. I only realized it after it was out. I couldn't tell him all about it. And then again—why not?

I waited until we were in a secluded booth in our usual Chinese restaurant. He said: "What's the matter, Francie? Is something on your mind? You don't seem yourself tonight."

It was so easy to get started, after that. What was more natural than to confide your troubles to your boy friend?

"He was a detective, that man you saw," I blurted out.

He wasn't as surprised as I'd expected him to be. He piled rice on my plate. "What'd he want with you?" he said.

"This man Masters they picked up from the river—he held his picture up to my eyes and asked me if I'd ever seen him before."

A forkful of chow mein halted halfway to his mouth.

"I said no, of course."

The forkful of chow mein went the rest of the way up.

"Then he asked me about—about a friend of mine named Jean Edwards, that got me my job. Asked me if I'd ever been up to her place. I said no, of course."

"Then what're you downhearted about? You gave him straight answers to straight questions. That's all there is to it. What's bothering you?"

"Nothing," I said muffledly.

He looked at me a minute or two. He scribbled something down on a scrap of paper and handed it to the Chinese waiter. I saw the

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waiter take it over to the bandleader. The music came around me, soft and persuasive.

All your fears are foolish fancies maybe—

Eddie stood up, held out his arms. "Come on, Francie, that's ours. You never could resist that number. It'll fix everything up."

I leaned my head against him as we glided around in the twilight dimness. "Feel better now?" he whispered.

"A little."

"Never mind, baby, it'll all come out in the wash."

I went out of step. "Oh, don't—don't use that word. I can't stand it—"

"Why?"

It got away from me so easily, like the tail of a kite, when the kite's already out of your hands. "Because it always reminds me of the way I saw him carried out that night—"

"Who, Masters?" He kept guiding me around softly in the shadowy crowd. "But I thought you said you weren't up there—"

"I told him that. But I was. I was hiding up there in a closet. I saw the whole thing happen. I can't tell you more than that about it, Eddie, because there's another person involved—"

The music ended and we went back to the booth. He had to make a phone call when the kumquats came on. It took him a little while, but he was smiling the same as ever when he came back. We didn't talk about it any more after that. I'd got it off my chest and I felt a lot better.

Instead of going on to a show the way we usually did, he took me back to my room. "You're tired and you ought to get a little rest, Francie."

"Suppose he comes around again?"

"He won't." He sounded strangely confident. "He won't bother you any more." Then he said: "I'll wait across the street until I see your room light go on, so you'll feel safer." Almost as though he knew ahead of time . . .

I went in and up the stairs and unlocked my darkened room. There were two messages under my door—a telegram and a phone message from Jean, in the landlady's writing—*Jean Edwards wants you to come up to her place at once, highly important.* Then when I opened the telegram, to my surprise that was from Jean too. Just five words—*Meet me by the mannequin.*

I ran to the window first of all, threw it up, signaled down to Eddie. "Eddie, wait for me. I have to go out again."

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A large black car had drawn up a few doors down, and the driver had come over to him to ask for a light or something. I saw the two of them standing there chatting casually the way men do.

Then I stood there knitting my brows over the two messages. One contradicted the other. Maybe one was fake, but if so, which one of the two? Her words that first night rang in my ears again. "Promise me you'll never go near there again." Still and all, both could be from her and both could be on the level. Maybe something had happened to change her plans. Maybe she'd found out she couldn't get away, and had sent the second message to cancel the first. The thing was, which one had preceded the other? Well, there was a way of finding that out.

I knocked on the landlady's door. "Which of these came first—can you tell me?"

"The telegram," she said unhesitatingly. "I remember I'd just finished slipping it under your door, when the phone started to ring down in the lower hall, and that was for you too."

"Thanks," I said. Jean's place had it, then. The phone message was the one to go by.

I hurried outside to Eddie. The other man was gone now, but the car was still standing there.

"That was a guy I used to know," he began. "He said I could have the use of his car until he comes out again—"

I hardly paid any attention to what he was saying. "Eddie, don't ask me any questions, but—just come along with me, will you?"

"You bet," he agreed, the way a boy friend should.

We passed Chalif's on our way up to Jean's place. I was glad now that I hadn't taken the telegram at its face value. There was no one in front of the mannequin. Jean had changed her mind after sending it.

"Stop just a minute," I said, on an impulse.

"Why here? The store was closed hours ago—"

"No, you don't understand. I have a habit whenever I'm in trouble—"

"Oh, yeah. That mascot of yours. You told me about that once." He veered accommodatingly to the curb and braked.

I jumped out and went over, while he stayed in the car. The window lights were on, the way they were every night until midnight. She was in a different gown tonight. Then I remembered it was Thursday. They changed the window displays every other Thursday. They must have just finished dressing the window before we got there.

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There was something about her face—A shock went through me as I halted before the thick plate-glass. *It was Jean's face!* I must be delirious, or losing my mind. She made a swift little gesture, hidden from the street. Touched one finger to her lips to warn me to silence. Then her hand stiffened into the mannequin's rigid wrist-bent pose again. I smothered a scream.

She remained motionless after that—all but her lips. I could see them wavering slightly. She was trying to say something to me. I watched them with desperate intentness, while she repeated endlessly, until I got it: "Don't—go. Don't—go. Don't—go."

"Come on," Eddie called impatiently from the car. "I thought you were in such a hurry to get wherever it is you're heading for."

"*Don't—go.*" The silent syllables kept pounding through the glass. She added an almost imperceptible shake of her head, invisible except to me.

"Are you coming? What's holding you up?"

"No," I said, hypnotized. I couldn't take my eyes off her face.

He got out, strode over to me, caught me roughly by the arm. "Why—what's the matter?" A sudden change had come over him—I couldn't quite identify it yet. He didn't waste a glance on the figure in the window. His back was to her. Over his shoulder I could see the warning shake of her head become frenzied.

"Then I'll give it to you right here—what's the difference where you get it, as long as we shut you up for good!"

The mask had fallen off, and I saw him now, for the first time, as he really had been all along. His face was now as repulsive as Rosetti's and those other men's. He had me trapped between two showcases, where the main store-entrance was, and there wasn't a soul in sight on the streets to help me.

He cast a quick glance over his shoulder, as though trying to decide whether to risk the sound of a gunshot. Then, instead, he brought out something stubby, and it suddenly doubled its length in his hand. A wicked blade shot out of it right while he held it.

"So you saw Masters go out with the dirty wash, did you? Well, here's an extra mouth to tell it to the cops through—a mouth in the middle of your heart!"

A terrible game of puss-in-corner began between us. As I shifted from side to side, looking for an opening, he shifted in accompaniment each time, blocking me. I didn't dare take my eyes from that vicious knife feinting at me, but I was dimly aware of a flurry of motion behind him in the store window.

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Suddenly I saw an opening—or thought I did. Maybe he gave it to me purposely. He had shifted over a little too far to one side. I darted for the avenue of escape like an arrow, flashed through—almost, but not quite. He swerved quickly behind me, his free hand shot out, clamped itself on my shoulder and pinned me fast. I could feel the flirt of air as the knife swept up. It would come down over me and plunge into my heart . . .

There was a flash inside the window beside me, a hollow thud, and pieces of glass fell out, leaving a jagged hole shaped like a maple leaf. A puff of smoke misted Jean's head and shoulders for a minute, then rose and disappeared. She hardly seemed to have moved at all. One hand, that had held a tinseled evening-bag until now, now grasped a snub-nosed revolver instead. Cottony smoke still licked from it.

The knife clattered to the sidewalk before my eyes. Then, horribly, his whole weight sagged against me from behind. I stepped forward, and he fell to the ground and lay there without moving.

Jean had disappeared inside the store. I was still cowering there, staring at his body, when she unlocked the front door and came out—still in the metallic wig she'd worn in the window.

"You poor innocent. Do you know who you picked for a boy friend? Rosetti's star banker. He presides at the main roulette table up at The Place every night. They must have sicked him on you purposely, to find out if you knew enough to be dangerous to them. And the minute he found out, he reported back to Rosetti.

"Luckily, I happened to get on an extension phone in the next room while he was making his tip-off call tonight. I had to reach you fast, and I didn't know how to do it. You were already out with the very guy that had fingered you. It was a cinch he wasn't going to let you out of his sight. Something you said last time I saw you came back to me. 'If you ever want me in a hurry and don't know where to find me, you can always meet me by the mannequin.'

"I got a hold of a gun and slipped out. I sent you a telegram to your room, and then I went over to the store. They were in the midst of dressing the windows when I got there, and the entrance had been left unlocked, so the guy supervising the work could slip out front and inspect the window every once in a while. That gave me an inspiration. I couldn't just wait for you on the open sidewalk. Eddie knew me too well. He would have spotted me and whisked you off with him before I had a chance to get in my warning. He was too

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good a triggerman to fool around with. I had to get the drop on him in some way.

"So I sneaked inside, unnoticed, and hid behind one of the counters until the window dressers had finished and gone. Then I opened the window, took out your mascot, changed clothes with her, fixed up my face and arms with some ochre powder I found in the store, put on her metallic wig, and stood there in her place, with the gun in my little jeweled bag.

"It was taking a big chance, until I had frozen into the right pose, but the streets are pretty quiet around here and no one passing by on the outside caught me at it. Then I had to hold the pose for what seemed like hours, and I thought you'd never come."

"What'll we do now?" I asked helplessly, looking down at the still form at our feet.

She shrugged. "I'll have to stay out of course, now that I've made the break, but it's just a matter of a day or two before they get the two of us. How can we buck a machine like the one Rosetti has got?"

"A detective named Armour—he was the one who questioned me—said if I ever had anything to tell him, he'd look after me."

"That's what they all say, but how can we be sure they're not taking presents from Rosetti on the side—"

"No, he was different. He was honest. You could see it in his face. He had a funny little cowlick down the middle of his forehead, like a fishhook, and it wouldn't stay back—"

"My God!" she exclaimed.

I said: "What's the matter?"

"Then they got him too, tonight. He must have been up there looking around for evidence single-handed, the fool! That proves he was honest, if nothing else. There was a guy with a cowlick drifting around from table to table, going through the motions of playing. I noticed him before I left. I could tell by Rosetti's face that they were wise to him, were getting ready to close in on him. Trixie was getting out the blanks and sombrero, to cover it up, when I came away. I bet he's already gone out in the wash!"

The prowl-car must have sidled up with its siren muffled. The first we knew about it was when two cops jumped out with guns drawn.

Jean didn't waste any time—there wasn't any to waste. "O.K. I did this, and here's the gun. But if you've got any sense you won't stop to ask questions about this guy. He'll keep until later. Send in

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a call quick, for all the reserves they can spare. Do you two know a plainclothesman named Armour?"

One of them nodded. "Yeah, Danny Armour. He's attached to this precinct."

"Well, he's attached to the sky-patrol by now, but if you get up there in time you may be able to catch them red-handed with the body. Rosetti's gambling place—I'll take you in the back way."

One of them said in a low voice to the other: "He was up to something tonight. I saw him marking bills in the back room—"

The other one hitched his gun ominously. "We'll take a chance. Put in the call, Bill."

And so I got my first ride in a police radio-car.

We stopped around the corner from Jean's place. She led the way in through the delivery entrance.

What she asked the colored boy on the elevator should have been very funny. Somehow it wasn't, it was gruesome.

"Has any laundry been sent out from upstairs yet, Jimmy?"

He said: "Yes, Miss Jean. The truck just pulled away li'l while ago. Pow'ful big wash tonight, too."

"Too late," she moaned.

One of the cops with us said through his clenched teeth: "Dead or alive, he's still evidence. Hurry up, what'd that truck look like?"

"I've seen it. You can spot it a mile away," Jean snapped. "Ivory-colored, and all lacquered-up like a bandbox. It'll be a toss-up between the two rivers, though."

"Well, this is a westbound street, so we'll take the one it heads for!"

We climbed back in the patrol-car and tore off again. The cordon was beginning to form around Rosetti's place as we left.

That truck must have made marvelous time, to get all the way down where we finally caught up with it. But our ride was nothing short of maniacal. I wasn't able to draw a full breath from the time we took off.

We overtook it halfway to the lonely warehouse district along the waterfront, screeched a little too far past, nearly turned over, but managed to come up onto the sidewalk in the process. The two "laundrymen" were armed, but never had a chance to prove it. The cops were on them before they'd even finished staggering out. By the time Jean and I came up they already had the big basket of "wash" out on the ground and were ripping it open.

They kicked away the blood-spattered towels and pillow cases,

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and I saw his face by the pale arc-light. It was he, all right, the man who had come up to my room. The cowlick was jagged and stiff with blood now.

"He's still evidence, poor fellow," one of the cops said.

"He's better than that!" Jean explained electrically, straightening up from bending over him. "There's still life in him, I just felt his heart! They were in too much of a hurry this time. Get him to a hospital quick, and you may still be able to pull him through!"

I'd thought we'd ridden fast on the first two legs of our trip but we had practically been bogged down compared to that stretch from waterfront to hospital.

I never thought I'd see that cowlick again, but I did—three weeks later, when Jean and I were taken down to the hospital. I even heard a voice come from under it. He was weak as a rag, but they'd pulled him through. The assistant D.A. who was going to prosecute Rosetti and his whole ring for murder was present at his bedside, to make the final arrangements with us. Jean was to be granted immunity for turning State's evidence as to the operation of Rosetti's many gambling establishments that she had presided over. I didn't need immunity to agree to testify to the murder of Masters, because I hadn't done anything.

I saw that cowlick all through the trial, sticking out stubborn as ever from under a huge gauze head-bandage.

Rosetti has long since been just a blackout in a prison lighting-system, but I'm still seeing that cowlick.

I see it every Saturday night around 8, and sometimes during the week, when I answer the doorbell in the little flat that Jean and I have taken together. And it won't be long now before I'll be Mrs. Cowlick—Mrs. Armour to you!

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

Bart Vent was a man of mystery. He lived alone in an isolated cottage in a remote English village. What did he do? How did he earn a living? What was in the unmarked brown parcel from London delivered the fourth of every month? And who was the equally mysterious woman who occasionally phoned him from New York?

WRITER'S BLOCK

by GEORGE BAXT

Harborford is an obscure little village misplaced in the heart of Cornwall, England. A few miles outside of Harborford there is an isolated and rarely traveled lane called, quixotically, the Druid Road. Even now, with property in Cornwall at a premium, Druid Road remains sparsely settled. There are about half a dozen homes to be found along the five-mile stretch, and most of these are reconverted crofts inhabited by descendants of the earliest Druid Road settlers, and one misanthropic individual named Bart Vent.

Vent's cottage was about fifty yards off the road, surrounded by bushes and trees that camouflaged it. Hidden in these bushes and trees by a network of cleverly cultivated vines was a gate wide enough for Vent to drive his battered Volkswagen through. He only used the vehicle every few weeks or so to drive into Harborford for supplies. Perhaps one or two tradespeople knew he was a Mr. Vent, but they had no idea as to his profession or his means of support.

He kept a small checking account in the town's only bank, but never consulted with the manager. His were always cash deposits. The cash, the postman suspected, is what arrived the fourth of every month in a brown parcel which showed no return address, though

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it had a London postmark. Those who had heard him speak, on the rare occasions when he spoke, suspected he was either an American or a Canadian.

Surprisingly enough, he had a telephone, though he received and made very few calls. Essie at the main switchboard (Harborford was still primitive enough for switchboard service) said he received occasional calls from New York City. To her intimates (three) she confided it was a woman calling from New York. She had given up attempts at eavesdropping on their conversations when both would realize their voices were growing faint because of Essie's interruptions.

What, someone occasionally wondered aloud, did Vent do with himself? Was he an artisan of some sort who required total isolation in order to create? Or was he just another harmless eccentric who chose to shut himself off from the world? Essie's brother Andrew, while rabbit hunting one morning, had strayed onto Vent's property and swore he heard a typewriter for a few moments, followed by a string of curses and imprecations and then the sound of what might have been a table being overturned. A frightened Andrew discreetly headed for cover in the woods and his brief adventure took its place in the Vent apocrypha.

Bart Vent's cottage was said to date from the Sixteenth Century. The main room, which was a combination kitchen and lounge, was constructed from huge blocks of stone. The bedroom and study, the latter added some fifty years back, were of sturdy oak. The cottage (as it has been always been called) was a small fortress. Behind the cottage was a potting shed and a garage for the Volkswagen. In front of the potting shed was an old well, long since dried, and in hot weather it sent forth a smell so repulsively noxious that Vent would be forced to cover it with some slats of wood. One of these days, he promised himself, he would buy some bags of cement in the village, fill the well, and be done forever with its offensive odor.

At the stove in the cottage Vent was cutting vegetables into a stew pot while muttering under his breath. A stranger stumbling into the room by mistake would have taken him for a madman, because every so often Vent would either whimper or curse or emit a shout of frustration that seemed to ricochet from wall to wall. Still brandishing the knife with which he'd been massacring the vegetables, Vent crossed to the oak table in the center of the room on which rested a battered portable typewriter containing a lonely sheet of white paper on which nothing had been written.

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Vent stared at the blank sheet like a soldier of fortune confronting a worthy adversary. Then after a few moments and with a combined look of frustration and anger, he ripped the sheet from the machine and attacked it viciously with the knife. The sheet of paper did not bleed, but it suffered numerous fatal injuries. Then the phone rang and Vent, who was a tall and muscular man, crossed to the wall where the phone was attached and without saying "Hello," held the phone to his ear. The party at the other end spoke in a voice that was strong, feminine, and loving.

"How goes it?"

"Nothing," said Vent, looking as though he was suppressing tears, "absolutely nothing."

"Oh, how awful, darling," she said with a sympathetic sigh. "Perhaps if you went somewhere else."

"There's nowhere else to go. Anyway, this place suits me fine. Nobody bothers me. The juices will flow again. I know they will. I'm going to fill that rotten well with cement."

Non sequitur, she thought to herself. If he's wandering into *non sequiturs*, he's really in trouble.

"What are you thinking?" he growled.

"I was thinking about the well and filling it with cement. Haven't there been any really good juicy murders in England lately?"

"Nothing worth considering." There was a pause, then he added. "Maybe I'll have to create one of my own."

Her laugh was dry and hollow. "Perhaps that's an idea. Now listen, look after yourself. Don't fly into any tantrums. I have something amusing to tell you. I'm having a meeting with a young writer this afternoon. He wants to write a book about the mysterious V. Barten."

Bart chuckled. "Call me afterwards and tell me all about it."

It had been a week earlier when Willi Arnold, sitting at his typewriter in the Soho loft he shared with his mistress, Agnes Rubens, tore a blank sheet of paper from the machine and began tearing it to shreds while shrieking hysterically with frustration. Agnes, who had been reclining on the couch reading a paperback when Willi's hysteria drew her attention, shook her head sadly.

"Writer's block! Writer's block! Writer's block!" He repeated the two words over and over again until Agnes, who had witnessed any number of variations of this scene shouted, "Then move onto another block or into another profession." She went back to the paperback, another winner by the mysterious V. Barten whose five books on

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celebrated unsolved murder mysteries had been gigantic bestsellers over the past ten years. The one she was now reading, *Mass Murderer*, had just come out in paperback, and Agnes, who was a computer analyst by profession, was enthralled.

After lighting a cigarette, Willi sank onto an ottoman and stared at the woman he loved and frequently wanted to kill. "Do you have to read a bestseller when I'm going crazy trying to come up with an idea for my next novel?" Willi had published three Gothics during the previous two years which had been minor successes and he now hungered to move into the really big money.

Agnes propped herself up on an elbow and fixed her lover with a steady eye. "This man is brilliant. Why don't you try reading him? Maybe you'll learn something. His other four books are up there on the top shelf."

"V. Barten." Willi spoke the name with derision. "I don't trust any author who hides behind a pseudonym."

"You're so sure it's a pseudonym?"

"You dummy, it's an anagram."

Agnes left the book and stared again at Willi. "What anagram?"

"B. Traven." There was a perplexed look on her face. "B. Traven. The author of *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* among other goodies. The mystery man who supposedly lost himself in the wilds of Mexico. He's never been identified."

"Who gets his royalties?"

"Don't be funny."

She stared at the ceiling. "V. Barten," she half whispered. Then she sat up and swung her legs off the couch. "Willi, my nose is beginning to itch."

"That means you're going to kiss a fool and at this moment I am in no mood to kiss you."

"It's itching from inspiration. V. Barten. His books—"

"I've read them all!" he admitted. "They're brilliant. How the hell he gets under the skin of a murderer he's never met. It's uncanny. I mean every single one of those books is about brutal, unsolved killings, yet he makes them read as though he was an eyewitness."

"Exactly!" cried Agnes. "There's a fascinating character for you—V. Barten himself!"

At first Willi stared at her as though she might soon have to be committed to an institution for the insane. Then he mulled over the name V. Barten in his mind until it took possession of his brain with an iron fist of inspiration. "Agnes," he said, speaking her name

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now as though it deserved beatification, "I think you've got something there."

"Terrific! At last I have served a purpose other than chief cook, bottlewasher, and mistress. I have, with any luck, broken your writer's block."

He leaped to the phone and called his editor at Heartbeat House (his publishers) to sound her out on the book about V. Barten. To his surprise she was completely enthusiastic and even told him the name of the agent who represented the mysterious and elusive V. Barten.

Nona Musoy sat at her desk like an empress about to decree the execution of a few traitors. She was a powerful writer's agent who fought hard and viciously to protect her small but select clientele. She now looked at Willi Arnold who sat on a straight-backed chair with his arms folded and with a look of determination. "I haven't the vaguest idea where V. is at the moment. I never know where he is until he phones for some money."

"At least he exists," said Willi with a friendly smile.

"Yes, he most certainly exists."

"You've met him?"

"Of course I've met him."

"What does he look like?"

"I can't tell you."

"Didn't you look at him?"

"Why do you want to do this book about him?"

"Because he's as fascinating to me as those unsolved crimes were to him. He writes as though he was there with the killers. Whoever murdered nine hitchhikers in southern California had to have given every detail to Barten."

"Barten reconstructed that on his own."

"And the Newark strangler? Are you telling me Barten is such a genius he was able to reconstruct the dying hours of those seven hapless women."

"He suffered a lot on that one. I know. He wrote the book in Atlantic City."

"Atlantic City!" He thought Nona had slightly bitten her lower lip. "Those twelve croupiers mysteriously killed! The gang brought in their own investigators but none of them could match Barten's deductions!" He leaned back. "So he was in Atlantic City when the croupiers were murdered."

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"I didn't say that."

"But he was, wasn't he?"

"I really don't remember."

"Come on, Miss Musoy, help me. *Help me!* I have had writer's block for almost a year now!" He thought he detected a small look of sympathy on her face. "Then when Agnes, the woman I live with—she's a great Barten fan—came up with this idea to do a book about him, I could feel the shackles dropping from my brain!"

She glanced at her wristwatch impatiently and then began a tattoo on the desk top with the fingers of her right hand. "Mr. Arnold, you are not the first person to want to write about V. In fact, the past year has been like an epidemic. Five people have sat in that chair you're sitting in now with ambitions to do a book about Barten and I successfully discouraged all of them."

"You won't discourage me."

"I admire your determination." She meant it. "Now I'm afraid my next appointment is being kept waiting."

He got to his feet and said, "I won't give up. But thanks for your time."

As he left her office, his hand on the knob of the door which he was slowly shutting, he realized there was no one in the outer office except her secretary-receptionist. He began bristling with anger and was about to re-enter Miss Musoy's office to tell her off when he heard her speaking softly into her telephone.

"Harborford, England, operator. Please call me back. Thank you."

Quietly he pulled the door shut behind him and grinned like the cat who had caught the mouse. Had he noticed Miss Musoy, she too, amusingly enough, had a similar expression on her face.

Over the following four weeks Willi did a crash course of research that took him from Newark to Atlantic City to southern California to Toronto and back to New York, the five settings for the five V. Barten true-crime thrillers. He interviewed every law officer involved in the five investigations and came to one inevitable conclusion: Barten had somehow cracked all five cases on his own and knew the identities of the five killers. No wonder he was hiding behind a pseudonym. No wonder he isolated himself from the rest of the world. Five murderers could very likely be on his trail to silence him forever!

Agnes listened to the theory with bug-eyed rapture. "But that's fabulous," she said. She had read his pages of voluminous notes

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which thankfully signified the end of his writer's block. "But are you sure he's in this God-knows-where Harborford in England?"

"Cornwall."

"What about Cornwall?"

"It's the southernmost tip of England. Daphne du Maurier country. That's where Harborford is hidden. I've been to the British tourist office. They pinpointed it for me. They think I'm nuts to want to go there, but I bet you that's where Barten is holed up. Why else should Nona Musoy put in a call there? LeRoy thinks I'm right."

"Who's LeRoy?"

"The detective who worked on the United Nations murders. He said that book was too much on the nose, that Barten had information to which only the police and the murderer were privy, and nobody came to LeRoy or any other officer in his precinct for research on those crimes except a couple of Sunday supplement hacks they've known for years. Agnes darling, I'm flying to England on Friday."

"Are you going to tell Nona Musoy?"

"What? And have her tip him off? Oh, no, darling, this is our secret!"

Nona Musoy cradled the telephone between her shoulder and her chin as with her free right hand she attacked the thumbnail of her left hand with an emery board.

"No sign?" she said into the phone.

"Not a flutter," said Bart at the other end.

"Do I dare ask if you've done any writing?"

"Don't be hateful."

"Well . . . I think that writer's block of yours is due to disappear soon. I feel it in my bones."

"From your mouth to God's ears."

Not many tourists visited Harborford. There was the occasional hitchhiker, such as this young American who now sat in the telephone office, his backpack resting on the floor near his feet, watching Essie knitting while waiting for the switchboard to come to life. Essie liked the young man who introduced himself as an American writer named Willi Arnold, explaining he was traveling through Cornwall doing research for a book he hoped to write about the mysterious Druids whose cult was said to have practiced its black magic here many centuries ago. She refused the cigarette he offered

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her but chewed over in her mind the question he had now put to her: Was Harborford noted for any strange, unexplained mysteries?

"Well," said Essie finally, "we're missing some hitchhikers, you know, like yourself."

Willi was intrigued. "What do you mean?"

"Well, about a year and a half ago this young German gent came through. You know something funny, he asked questions similar to the ones you've been asking—you know, any mystery connected here, that sort of thing. Next thing you know, there's some inquiries from Germany about him. He just disappeared into thin air! Then a few months later there was a young lady from London. Same questions as the German. She disappeared too, or seems to have."

"How many others were there?"

"Two more that I know about. One from Canada and another from South Africa. Those were both charming gentlemen."

"Was there anything about their disappearances in the newspaper?"

"Not that I know of."

The board buzzed and she plugged in. She whispered to Willi, "New York calling. Talk about mysteries . . ." Into the mouthpiece she said, "Trying to connect you." She heard Barten pick up at the other end. "He never says 'Hello.' It's like he always knows who's at the other end."

Willi felt the tips of his fingers tingling. "Who's that?"

"A certain Mr. Vent," said Essie as she resumed knitting, "Bart Vent. Talk about mysteries, he's one if ever I saw one!"

Willi pressed her and she told him everything she knew about Bart Vent—that he lived in isolated mystery on Druid Road, that no one knew what he did for a living, but he received a good sum of money every month, and only last week he bought five bags of cement and the Lord knows what he planned to do with those!

"Druid Road. In which direction is Druid Road?"

In a huge trough, Bart Vent was mixing the cement with a hoe. The well was covered with the wooden slats but still there were distinct traces of the noxious odor. He was not too preoccupied to sense the presence of another person. He didn't bother to look up. His intuition told him the identity of the intruder.

"Hello," said Willi.

"Hello," replied Bart, still not looking up.

"I seem to have lost my way."

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"Seems like it."

"My name is Willi Arnold. I'm from New York."

"You're a long way from home."

"Do you mind if I remove my backpack? It's a little heavy and I'm tired."

Bart Vent finally looked at Willi. Bart was much bigger than Willi. "Were you planning on staying?"

Willi smiled as he laid the backpack on the ground. "That depends on you, Mr. Vent."

"Then you haven't lost your way, since you know my name."

"Bart Vent. Almost an anagram of B. Traven. And V. Barten, which is."

"Bingo."

Willi almost leaped for joy. "Then you don't deny it?"

Bart shrugged. "I'm getting tired of running. I've got this deadly case of writer's block. I don't think I'll ever write again."

"That's the way I felt until my girl friend gave me the idea to do a book about you. Look Mr. Vent, or Mr. Barten, or whatever you prefer to be called by."

"My real name is Ben Vart."

"I think I've figured out why you're on the lam."

Bart leaned against the well with his arms folded. "Oh, yes?"

"You're afraid the five unknown murderers are tailing you. In those books of yours you certainly know too much—in fact, I suspect you know the identity of all five of those killers. You should have cooperated with the police."

"I never needed the police."

"Will you give me the information I need? Will you help me write this book about you?"

Bart had resumed mixing the cement, clutching the hoe now as though it could be a lethal weapon. "So you think the five murderers are tailing me and that's why I'm on the lam? Terrific idea."

"But isn't it a fact?"

Bart ignored his question. "A man writes a book about an unsolved murder case and then writes four more that are uncanny in their conclusions and then goes to earth because he now thinks the uncaught murderers are pursuing him." At last he smiled. "Say, Willi, you're a hell of a lot more original then the other four pests who were around here looking to do a book about me."

Willi paled. "The other four hitchhikers—"

"You've heard about them?"

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"The lady who runs the switchboard in town—"

"Nosey dame. Well, if ever a mass murderer runs loose in Harborford, I can assure you she'll be the first on his list." His arm brushed one of the slats covering the well and it clattered to the ground.

"That's an awful smell coming from that well," said Willi.

"Sure is," said Bart Vent. "That's why I'm going to fill it with this cement."

"About those four hitchhikers who disappeared—"

"Five," said Bart Vent as he brought the hoe up and then in a ferocious downsweep motion sent the blade crashing into Willi Arnold's skull.

Several hours later Bart answered the phone.

"Hello, sweetheart."

"You sound marvelous," gurgled Nona from New York.

"Broke my writer's block."

"Oh, darling, how wonderful."

"That person you mentioned finally showed up and came up with this nutty theory that maybe the perpetrators of five unsolved mass murders was chasing the author who wrote the books, so he's taking it on the lam—"

"What a splendid idea! You could practically do a book about *that!*"

"Maybe later, sweetheart. Right now, I'm outlining this book about the missing hitchhikers. I think it's going to be another winner. And believe it or not, I've even got the next one on the back burner."

"You don't!"

"I do! Supposing right here in Cornwall, in this sleepy little village of Harborford, a middle-aged telephone operator is found strangled with her knitting, and then—"

"Don't tell me any more! It's wonderful! And darling, the well—"

"Oh, I finished that too! Took five sacks of cement! I tell you, baby, I've had quite a day. Filled in the well, got the idea for a book to follow this one on the hitchhikers, but best of all, I finally broke that damned writer's block. It's so good to feel human again."

"Q"

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John Michael Halloran, seven years old and small for his age, didn't hate the girl Rose. She was simply out of place. She was in Mama's place. Why couldn't she see that? . . . A story as moody as the coast of Maine . . .

TRAGEDY AT CATTERS COVE

by THOMAS OTTER

"Jaw-knee! Jaw-knee!"

"My name is John Michael Halloran," the boy muttered to himself. "Mama always called me John Michael. My name is not Jaw-knee."

He knew that the girl, Rose, was calling him in to lunch. The knowledge only made him stoop in feigned absorption over the black leathery shell of a dead horseshoe crab the early-morning tide had deposited on the rim of the cove. Let her shout. Let her scream her silly tonsils out.

"So there you are. Somebody's ears need a good scrubbing, young man."

Rose had come round the corner of the cottage and was standing, hands on hips, in the full glare of the noonday sun, which kindled to reddish gold the broad band of freckles across the bridge of her nose and the stray wisps of hair that had escaped, even on this windless day, from the barrette at the nape of her neck. She was a big girl and quite handsome in a careless, generous way—one of those young women in whom a touch of blowziness seems to promise a candid mind. There were laughter crinkles at the corners of her eyes and her exasperation with the boy was tempered by good humor.

"Cat got your tongue?"

John Michael straightened but did not turn around. He gazed fixedly out toward the open waters of Casco Bay and the three wooded islets that broke the even sweep of the horizon—Winken, Blinken, and Nod Mama used to call them. The oncoming tide had already driven a thick snake of water winding down the center of the long narrow cove. It was erasing the random mud-craters left

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by the boots and spades of the morning's clam diggers one by one. About a hundred yards out, the current divided around the high shiplike rock that Daddy called "a glacial erratic" and Mama "the *S.S. Halloran*," met itself again on the near side, curled past the cottage, and finally spread into a shallow pool in the flats beyond.

"Please, Johnny, your chowder's getting cold." Rose shook her head with a puzzled frown and turned back toward the kitchen door.

As if her departure had been a signal, the boy wheeled around and trudged after her, digging the toes of his sneakers into the roots of the grass with exaggerated force. He would wait until she closed the screen door behind her, then he would go in to lunch. He would go in by himself. Not with her. She wouldn't take Mama's place. She couldn't.

As he climbed the three steps to the back stoop, he heard Bill Cully's voice at the kitchen table. "Is His Lordship about to favor us with his presence?"

Bill used to be his friend. Twice last summer Bill had taken him out in the dory and let him help bait lobster traps. Now Bill was *her* friend; *she* was the one he came to see. That was plain enough.

"Don't be nasty to the poor child, Bill. He's taken it awful hard, you know."

"No matter how hard he's taking it, he doesn't have to take it out on you, does he? You didn't shoot that plane down."

"Shush! Little pitchers have big ears."

John Michael was in the kitchen. Staring straight ahead, he marched to the sink. Seven years old and small for his age, he had to stand on tiptoe to turn on the water and reach the cake of brown soap from its tray at the back of the sink board. Mama used to wash his hands for him before lunch. She made a game of it—every finger had its name. "Let's see if Gertrude is cleaner than Pete," she would say, or "Sally doesn't want to curl up next to Phil. He's too dirty." Rose couldn't think of things like that. And he'd hate it if she tried!

Rose had come to take Mama's place. Daddy was a busy newspaper editor and could come to Maine only on weekends—sometimes not even then. He had hired Rose in Boston to stay with him in the cottage all summer.

Mama was dead.

Oh, nobody had ever told him so—no one had ever used that word right out. But they couldn't fool him with their talk about her having "gone away for a long time." He knew. He'd seen the headlines in Daddy's paper. TRAGEDY IN POCONOS—JET DOWN WITH 106

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ABOARD: ALL DEAD. All dead. That was what "tragedy" meant. Mama was part of the tragedy. Now Rose had come to take her place.

He finished drying his hands and turned toward the kitchen table. Bill Cully had got up—he and Rose were standing near the door. Grown-up men were always taking Rose aside, standing close to her to talk. Even Daddy had sat out on the screened porch with her for more than two hours after it got dark last Saturday. John Michael could hear their voices, relaxed and peaceful, drift up past his bedroom window in the smoke from Daddy's pipe. That was a bad time. Better not think about that now.

"No, I'm not going to stay for lunch and have Halloran, Senior find out his hired girl is feeding the family rations to her admirers," Bill was saying. "Besides, Dad needs me to tend the pump while he takes the pickup into Bath for some lumber this afternoon."

Bill's father owned a marina half a mile away through the pines on the neck of land across Catters Cove from the Halloran cottage. By road, though, it was almost two miles around the tidal flats at the head of the cove, with no houses or other buildings between. There was no deep-water mooring in Catters Cove, but it did offer the other quality most sought along the Maine coast: seclusion.

"You? An admirer? Shucks, and here I thought you were hanging around just to keep your hands free of work until college starts again in the fall."

"While you, of course, work your fingers to the bone. No doubt you'll pass the biggest part of the afternoon aboard the *S.S. Halloran*. That's tough duty."

The two of them broke off their banter to look at John Michael, who had let his spoon drop with a clatter into his empty chowder bowl and was staring at them stonily. So Daddy had betrayed him! Daddy had told Rose Mama's private name for the big rock in the cove. And she had told Bill. How else could he know? And they were using Mama's private name as if it belonged to them, as if they had invented it. That was betrayal. Black betrayal!

"Well, I think I'll clear out before Svengali, Junior there lays the evil eye on me." Bill's uneasiness was only half assumed. "Take care, young Marster, and try to cheer up a bit, can't you?"

He drove away and now there was only Rose. She came over and stood by the table.

"Finished your chowder already?" She could see that he had—so it wasn't really a question, which made his silence seem less rude than it might have seemed.

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"I made you a nice rice pudding."

She placed it on the table in front of him. It was still warm and smelled faintly of nutmeg. John Michael looked at it and thought about the sponge-cake cart with marshmallow wheels drawn by a banana horse on toothpick legs that Mama had made for him as a surprise on April Fools' Day. That was less than a month before.

"Aren't you going to eat any? It's good."

"Not hungry any more." The words were spoken to the wall, to the table, to the stove in the corner—to anything but the living girl.

Rose sat down opposite him, propping her elbows on the table and her chin on her thumbs, and gazed at the closed little face that so carefully avoided looking at her. It was painfully thin. Even with the sandy cowlick he resembled a little old man.

"Why do you hate me so, Johnny? I'm as nice to you as I know how." She paused, waiting for a reply. "I want you to like me."

"Don't hate you."

It was true: he didn't hate her. She was simply out of place. You didn't hate the fly in your stew, but you didn't want it there either. She was in Mama's place. Why couldn't she see that?

Rose sighed, put his milk glass in his bowl with his spoon, and carried them to the sink. She forced herself to smile and speak to the boy as though all was well between them. That was probably best, she supposed.

"I think I'll grab a bite to eat myself and then sunbathe for an hour or so before the tide gets too high. You'll be O.K., I know." She had formed the habit of sunbathing on the big rock in the cove. Like the prow of a liner heading for the open sea, its wedge-shaped top sloped gradually down on the landward side. She could draw the rowboat up with her there and bask to her heart's content until the advancing tide began to nudge them both off. At high tide the rock was completely awash.

She could just as well have sunbathed on the lawn behind the cottage and pretended to herself that she rowed out to the rock for privacy. The real reason was that she was a city-bred girl and rowing the boat was still a novelty to her, a kind of mild adventure, even in the surfless waters of the cove. Learning to row the boat was the first thing she'd written home about, to impress her younger brother.

The sun was still shining, and now there was no movement in the air at all—the afternoon was going to be heavy and sticky. John Michael stood at the screen and looked out. A dark cloud low on the

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southern horizon seemed to fuse Winken, Blinken, and Nod into one island. The scene was unnaturally still until a kingfisher shattered the trance by flying from a pine on the left of the cove to an identical pine on the right with a raucous scream. It was a pointless thing to do.

"A good day to work on the paper," John Michael said to himself, turning from the door and heading for the stairs to the second floor.

Like many a little boy, he wanted to grow up and follow in his father's footsteps. Daddy was a newspaper man; he would be a newspaper man too. When he got to his room, he took down a large ring-binder notebook from the bookshelf by the window and opened it on his desk, where several sharpened pencils were standing upright in a small porcelain cream jug shaped like a pig.

He sat himself at the desk—very erect, very businesslike—and drew the notebook to him. All of its pages through to the end had been carefully lined down the center so that the two halves would approximate the width of newspaper columns. This was his summer paper. The first page bore the bold superscription *CATTERS COVE SON-HERALD*. About nine or ten pages were already filled with stories, each with its headline. The headlines showed a sad similarity—DISASTER IN ROCKIES, TRAGEDY AT WORLD'S FARE, DISASTER ON ARTIC ICECAP. His young mind was freighted with calamity.

He selected his longest yellow pencil, wet it on the tip of his tongue, leaving a tiny black mark there, and set to work at the top of a fresh column, printing with painstaking deliberation:

DISASTER ON SPANISH MAINE

The nucleer submarine Rover was on the Spanish Maine looking for Captin Kids treasur. Suddenly a whole bunch of giant Squids came along. There were very many of them. No matter which way it turned—

He went on for more than half an hour, filling a column with printing of a finicking neatness unnatural in so young a child. The tale was heroic but sorrowful. All hands, needless to say, went down with the ship. All dead: that was the persisting thread in whatever web his imagination wove.

The day had become even stiller and more oppressive. Through the torpid silence the sound of oars grating in oarlocks broke into his brown study. That must be the girl Rose. She was pulling the oars alternately, left then right, in her amateurish way.

John Michael walked over to the window and thrust his head out

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far enough to see along the side of the cottage and on out the cove. The sunlight reflected from the ripples was nearly blinding, but now there was more darkness low in the south and east. Yes, there she was, more than halfway to the rock already. Her pink skin, set off against her white bathing suit, looked both cooked and raw at the same time, like a lobster after you dropped it in the boiling water. Daddy said a lobster can't feel pain. Daddy must know.

A pity she couldn't do anything right—anything at all. She couldn't swim, couldn't even row a boat in a straight line. The prow kept veering, first to the right, then to the left. Well, she would get there in the end, no doubt. He drew his head back in and hitched up his shorts with an old man's gesture.

The Tale of Jemima Puddleduck was still on the bedside table where he'd left it last evening. Beatrix Potter's books were Mama's favorites. He had a complete set at home in Boston and another here at the cottage. Now he had to read them to himself. He knew them almost by heart and could remember exactly how Mama used to read them aloud from the cone of lamplight in the safe cave of his bedroom—her phrasing, her intonation, the timbre of her voice.

He stretched out on his back across the bed and began to read, slowly and in a savoring way, about silly, dissatisfied Jemima Puddleduck and how she had set off to find a place where she would be allowed to hatch her own eggs. Before long he came to his favorite picture, the one that showed the "gentleman with sandy whiskers" (a fox, of course) sitting on a stump pretending to read his newspaper but really peering over it at Jemima Puddleduck and speculating about how she would look in a roasting pan.

John Michael looked very hard at the picture. The air was close and warm and between his eyes and the book it seemed to shimmer and billow. The picture faded almost away. Then, effortlessly, John Michael was right in the picture, standing between Jemima Puddleduck and the gentleman with sandy whiskers, and a beautiful woman was advancing through that row of—foxgloves, were they?—at the back.

The woman was singing:

"John Michael, John Michael has a left shoe,
But can't find the right one. What will he do?"

But that was what Mama used to sing to him when she tied his shoes in the morning. She would pretend that she couldn't find one of them under the bed. Yes, the beautiful woman was Mama. She had to be.

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The picture had opened out into a big green field, a very big field indeed. And he and Mama and the fox and the duck were boarding a silvery airplane with black crosses on its wings. The stewardess was a little black pig in a pink dress. "Take your seats," she told them in a snuffling, grunty voice, "and *please* don't cry no matter *what* happens."

Now they were flying over mountains—great jagged peaks of granite and ice. "Look at the Poconos," Mama said. She laughed and swung her right fist up to his nose in a slow playful arc. "Those are the Poke-in-the-Nose, John Michael. Those are the Poke-in-the-Nose Mountains."

She laughed again.

They were falling fast. They should have hit one of those cruel peaks long long ago, but they just kept falling. Where were the fox and the duck? The air screamed by outside. He buried his face deep in Mama's soft warm fur collar the way he used to on long drives on winter nights. "John Michael," she murmured, "John Michael, John Michael—"

"Jaw-knee! Jaw-knee!"

He sat bolt upright with a jerk, and the book slid from his chest to the floor. That couldn't be Mama. Where was she? And who was calling? The wind was real. It screamed and whined. But why was it so dark?

"Jaw-knee! Jaw-knee!"

Rose. Of course—it must be Rose. He had been dreaming, and while he was dreaming the sun had gone away. Those flailing white arms were the curtains blowing back from the open window. He ran out of his room and down the stairs. Flinging back the screen door, he leaped over the stoop down onto the lawn and into the wind. He couldn't have said why he felt so much urgency. The wind was in him—the wind and the sudden darkness.

God or the Fourth Ice Age tore off the coast of Maine in a long, deeply jagged line such as you might make on a tabletop by dipping your spread fingers again and again in a pool of molasses and dragging them firmly to one side. By the time the Atlantic reaches the likes of Catters Cove it has spent its fury on many a headland and island, its swells and breakers have been shattered and dispersed. But the tide is obstinate; the tide refuses to yield until it has tested its strength against the continent itself. With a fresh wind behind it, the tide pushes like a thousand stubborn elephants.

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This was a full-moon spring tide. John Michael could see that the waves, which were real little waves now and not the usual ripples, were already lapping over the morning's high-water mark. The horseshoe crab he had gazed at so intently a few hours before was already dislodged and floating away. And the current was still setting in strong.

The *S.S. Halloran* was well covered. Rose was in water now to her hips and now to her waist as the swells rose and fell. She couldn't hold her footing much longer on the smooth rock. Every surge pushed her landward down the sloping surface, and she had to struggle back against the current again and again.

She must have fallen asleep on the warm stone without holding fast to the boat's painter. The oncoming tide, as the wind gathered behind it, had nudged the boat away and lifted it clear. That would have happened an hour or so ago, before the sky had closed in and the wind had begun to sough so loudly through the pines. By now the boat would be beyond the cottage, spinning aimlessly in the flats.

Soon Rose would go the same way, but since she couldn't swim a stroke the current would never carry her to shallow water fast enough to save her.

She was shouting again.

Her voice sounded weaker—it barely carried over the whine of the wind. She must, he supposed, have been shouting for a long time now.

"Jaw-knee! Phone Bill! Help! Phone Bill!"

Phone Bill. Yes, that would be the sensible thing to do. Bill might be able to drive over in time to save her. Even in bad weather there was no difficulty or danger for a good swimmer in the sheltered waters of the cove. And John Michael knew how to use the phone. She knew that.

He turned and walked back toward the cottage, moving purposefully this time, with calmness and deliberation.

"Jaw-knee!" she called once more. "Jaw-knee! Please!"

He didn't look back.

Once through the door he turned to his left. The telephone hung on the wall at the foot of the stairs. He walked past it, checked himself for an instant, then proceeded with the same fatal deliberation up the stairs to his room.

He sat himself at his desk, opened the *CATTERS COVE SON-HERALD* to page eleven, selected a sharp pencil, wet it on his

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tongue, and began to print in his painstaking way: TRAGEDY AT CATTERS COVE

He rose and went to his father's room to look at the electric clock on the night table there. Returning to his desk, he sat down and took up his pencil again:

At almost five this after noon the girl Rose drownded in Catters Cove. She was on board the SS Halloran which she shudnt have known about.

He sat back and considered. Then he rose again, went to the window, and thrust his head out. The afternoon had become so dark he could scarcely make her out now. Her red hair, blown forward around her face in an aureole, looked black. The current slanted her inshore like the figurehead of an old ship running ahead of the wind. She was still hanging on—waiting for Bill, he supposed.

John Michael pulled in his head and returned to his printing.

"She was filled with hope," he added, "until the very end."

"Q"

NEXT ISSUE...

12 *NEW* stories—including

RUTH RENDELL (about the fever tree)

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Rand)

JACK RITCHIE (about murder off limits)

H. R. F. KEATING (a hell of a story)

GEORGE BAXT (about a woman envied)

plus a rollicking reprint by P. G. WODEHOUSE

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

The leftover of an almost used-up bar of soap—a sliver. How much could it be worth? One cent? Not even that much. Yet a small group of young musicians—Blue Flame, they called themselves—were willing to pay Nick Velvet's fee of $25,000 for that sliver of soap . . .

THE THEFT OF THE SLIVER OF SOAP

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The clients who hired Nick Velvet's services generally found him at home not far from New York City, perhaps seated on the porch of his remodeled old house with a bottle of imported beer in his hand. It was rare indeed when an assignment came to him away from home, especially on those infrequent occasions when he and Gloria took a few days off to go boating on Long Island Sound.

But this July was to be different. They'd sailed out of the Sound and up Buzzards Bay between Cape Cod and the Massachusetts mainland, planning to dock at a marina in the area and spend a few days simply relaxing. It had been a good year financially for Nick, and there was no need for him to accept another assignment right away. He'd felt guilty about neglecting Gloria so much while on his travels. A few days together, without the pressures of his work, was something he looked forward to.

They docked the yacht near Wareham and then went ashore together in the early evening to buy some beer and breakfast supplies. It was while they were paying for their purchases that a slim dark-

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haired young woman wearing a T-shirt and jeans approached them. "Pardon me," she said, "but aren't you Nick Velvet?"

There was little point in denying it. "That's right. Do I know you?"

"No, but you helped a friend of mine once. I wonder if I could talk to you. My name is Lisa Mulcahy."

Nick and Gloria exchanged glances. "Sure," he replied with some reluctance, "I guess so."

They left the groceries in the car and walked over to a lunch counter across the street. Over coffee in a cramped booth the girl said, "I want you to steal something for me."

"Sorry," Nick replied. "I'm on vacation."

"It's very important. When I recognized you just now I was at my wit's end. I was even thinking about breaking into the house myself."

"Suppose you start at the beginning. I'll listen to your story but I can't promise to help."

"I guess I have to tell you about Rod Seeker first. He owns a chain of fancy supper clubs around New England, and he had a place up near Plymouth called the Magellan. For the past two years I've been singing with a group called Blue Flame and he booked us in there for six weeks in the spring. One night after closing, the Magellan caught fire and burned to the ground. We lost all our equipment and amplifiers. We had a little insurance on it, but not enough to cover the money we lost being out of work. I figured Rod Seeker owed us."

"Anything suspicious about the fire?" Nick asked. He knew some restaurant owners who'd used a match instead of their wits when business turned sour.

"Naturally the police arson squad looked into it, but Seeker was in Boston the night it happened, with a perfect alibi. They didn't find a thing."

"What does Seeker say about it?"

"That any claims we have are up to the insurance company. When I tell him he owes us a hundred thousand dollars he just laughs."

"A hundred thousand—"

"I forgot to mention all our arrangements. Two years' work up in smoke! It's probably more than a hundred thousand, really."

"And you're asking me to steal this money from Seeker?"

"Of course not! I know you only steal worthless things. I want you to steal a sliver of soap from the upstairs bathroom at his house."

"Soap?"

"Soap." She leaned forward across the table with the air of a conspirator. "Seeker ordered a new shipment of pink soap with the

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name *Magellan* imprinted on it a few weeks before the fire. Afterwards, when I called on him about our losses, I saw one of the bars in the bathroom. It didn't dawn on me then how important it was. Later I got to thinking—if he had that soap at home, maybe he removed it because he knew there was going to be a fire. See what I mean?"

"There could be other explanations," Nick said cautiously.

"I went back to his house today, figuring I'd talk to him and then ask to use the bathroom and steal the soap. But he wouldn't let me in the front door. Said we'd done all the talking that was necessary and anything else I had to say I should call the insurance company. That's when I thought about breaking in tonight, but I know it would be hard. He has burglar alarms all over the place."

"Is he married?"

"Divorced. He lives alone at the house right now. He doesn't even bother with servants unless he's entertaining, because he travels a lot to his other clubs."

Nick thought about it, but not for very long. "You see, I don't steal things for my health. My fee is quite high."

"How high?"

"Twenty-five thousand."

Lisa Mulcahy's eyes widened. "That much for a piece of soap? It can't be anything more than a sliver by this time, unless he's started on a new bar."

"If you really manage to get a hundred thousand, one way or another, it would only be twenty-five percent."

"I don't know," she replied. "I'd have to talk to the others."

"What others?"

"The guys in the group. Blue Flame—you know? There's Jaeger and Mousey and Ken."

"Well," Nick said, "you can talk to them and let me know." He started to slide out of the booth, but Gloria blocked his way and didn't move.

"Come on, Nicky, give her a chance. You don't need to collect your full fee from these kids."

He sighed and turned back to the young woman. "Could you talk to your friends and meet me here in the morning? I think we can work something out."

"Really?" Her voice was buoyed with excitement. "I'll bring them with me! You can meet us for breakfast."

Later, when they returned to the boat with their supplies, Gloria

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said, "You did the right thing, Nicky. Sometimes you have to help these young people, even if they can't afford your usual rates."

As he was falling asleep that night, lulled by the gentle rocking of the boat, he realized that Lisa Mulcahy never had mentioned the name of her friend, the one he was supposed to have helped.

In the morning Nick decided that he'd have to rent a car. They picked up a little import and headed back to the lunch counter for the meeting with Lisa and her friends.

She'd arrived ahead of them and waved as they entered, motioning them to a booth where she sat with two bearded young men wearing cut-off jeans and T-shirts. They shook hands all around and the taller of the two, the one named Jaeger, said, "Thanks for offering to help us, Mr. Velvet."

"Ken couldn't come," Lisa said, explaining the absence of the other group member. "He's in Boston seeing about getting us some new equipment."

Mousey, a short man with beady eyes that must have contributed to his nickname, grinned and showed the gap of a missing tooth. "It would be great if you could get that soap for us."

"Did you tell them my price?" Nick asked Lisa.

"With a bit of luck we can pay you the twenty-five grand," Jaeger answered before Lisa had a chance to speak. "But we need the soap to prove he had advance knowledge of the fire. Once we have that, I think he'll come across."

"Isn't that like blackmail?" Gloria asked.

"It's the only way we can get the money that's owed us!" Lisa Mulcahy sputtered. "Seeker's the criminal—he's the one who burned the place down!"

Nick held up a hand. He'd stopped forming moral judgements long ago. "I'll do it. How you use that sliver of soap afterwards is your own business, as long as I get paid."

"How soon can you get it?" Mousey asked.

"With luck, maybe today."

"In daylight?" Lisa asked, her mouth dropping.

"You told me there were burglar alarms. I'm certainly not going there at night."

"But you haven't even seen the house yet," she reminded him.

"Then let's drive out and take a look at the place. I'll want to meet Mr. Seeker anyhow."

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Lisa and the two men piled into the front seat of a battered pickup truck while Nick and Gloria followed in their rented car. They drove a few miles north on the main highway, then turned off onto a side road. Nick saw Lisa signal through their rear window as they approached Rod Seeker's home. It was an elaborate place in the wooded area south of Plymouth, and several massive oak trees stood like sentinels in the front yard, some distance from the white Colonial house itself.

As they drove past, Nick noticed several gypsy moths circling the trunks of the oak trees. That gave him the idea he needed. They were males, he knew. The females didn't fly.

About a half mile down the road the truck had pulled off to wait for them. "What do you think?" Lisa asked.

"I can do it, but I need to make a purchase first."

"What sort of purchase?"

"I need a garden-supply store. Then I'll explain."

"There's a big one over on Beach Road," Mousey said.

They led the way with Nick following. He went in alone and found what he needed at once—a gypsy moth trap that used a scented sex lure to tempt the male moths into a metal bucket where a pesticide killed them.

"What's that for?" Lisa asked when he'd returned to the car.

"You'll see."

Nick quickly opened the box and dug around until he found a sealed foil pouch containing the sex lure tape. The tape itself was only half the size of a postage stamp, with its potent surface protected by an adhesive backing. He slipped it into his pocket.

"I need one person to help me," he told them, "and I guess it had better be Gloria. He knows the rest of you. But let's change vehicles. We'll take the truck and you people can have the car. We'll meet back at that lunch counter."

Nick climbed behind the wheel and retraced their route to Rod Seeker's house. He turned into the driveway and drove the truck up to the front door. A man in a sports shirt and slacks appeared in answer to his ring. "You the owner here?" Nick asked.

"That's right."

He held out his hand. "Nick Velvet, Massachusetts Pest Control. Pleased to meet you."

"Rod Seeker." He accepted Nick's hand with a firm grip. "But we don't have any pests."

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"No? What about all those gypsy moths flying around your oak trees?"

Seeker stared out toward the trees. "I did notice some things flying around the last couple of days. And gypsy moths are certainly a problem this year."

"You'd better come out with me and take a look. In concentrations this heavy they've been known to attack people. Isn't that right, Gloria?"

"Sure is," she agreed, climbing out of the truck.

Seeker looked doubtful. "I never heard anything about them attacking people."

"We try to keep it out of the papers."

Seeker had barely left his doorway and started down the steps when the first of the moths began homing in on him. Others started to follow, as he tried to brush them away.

"My God!" Nick exclaimed. "It's an attack!"

They were all over Seeker now, circling and swooping and lighting on his arms as he beat them off. "Help me! Get them away from me!"

"I'll have to call our emergency spray team," Nick told him. "Where's your phone?"

"There's one right inside the door," Seeker shouted, trying to point while fighting off a renewed attack of the moths. "Tell them to hurry!"

While Gloria tried to beat off the moths with her jacket, Nick entered the house through the partly open front door. They'd told him Seeker lived alone and he hoped it was true. With barely a glance at the telephone he hurried up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He entered the bathroom and saw the mostly used-up bar of soap in its damp tray. Though it was worn down, Nick could just barely make out the indentations of the word *Magellan*.

He snatched it up, wrapped it in a clean handkerchief, and slid it into his pocket. Then he was racing down the stairs. He was out the front door in less than a minute's time.

"How long before they get here?" Seeker shouted from the ground. Gloria was straddling him, waving the jacket protectively overhead.

"It'll be a while, I'm afraid. Meantime I'll try something else." He took the jacket from Gloria and bent to help Rod Seeker to his feet. "Sometimes motion can attract them and lead them away," he said, starting to wave the jacket more vigorously.

As if by magic the gypsy moths began to follow the movement of

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the jacket, all but ignoring Seeker. "Start the truck," Nick shouted to Gloria. "Maybe we can lure them away."

The moths were closing in on the jacket as Nick dove into the truck. He waved the jacket from the window as Gloria drove slowly off, and a trail of moths began to follow. "What now, Nicky?"

"Just keep driving slow till we're out of sight of the house."

"But those gypsy moths are following us!"

"I stuck that sex lure tape on Seeker's sleeve when we shook hands. Then when I helped him up I removed it and stuck it to the jacket. I'll peel it off and drop it by the roadside, and the moths will stop following us."

"Did you get the soap?"

"Yes—right in my pocket."

They drove on to the lunch counter, where Lisa Mulcahy and her companions were waiting. "Did you get it?" Jaeger asked at once.

"Here it is," Nick said, unwrapping the sliver of soap and passing it over. "Remember our agreement. I've got money coming from this."

"You bet!" Jaeger replied, taking the soap.

"Is that it?" Lisa asked, leaning over to inspect it.

"That's it. Seeker's goose is cooked."

Nick gave them the marina's address. "We'll probably be there till the end of the week. I hope you'll have the money for me."

"Don't worry," Jaeger said. "We're good for it."

On the way back to the marina Gloria said, "You were fine today, Nick. Really fine. I know you won't regret it, even if you never get a cent."

"Believe me, if I don't get a cent I'll regret it!"

The following morning Nick awoke to the gentle swaying of the boat, but he knew at once that it was not caused by waves. Someone was boarding the boat. As he listened in his bunk he heard the footsteps of two persons. He nudged Gloria as he slipped out of bed. "Keep quiet. We've got visitors," he whispered.

He hadn't brought a weapon on their vacation, so one of the butcher knives from the galley would have to do. He moved silently across the deck on bare feet, adjusting his eyes to the dim light. It was still a few minutes till sunrise.

He was reaching for one of the knives when the hatch above his head flew open and an arm holding a snub-nosed revolver came into

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view. "Freeze right there!" a voice commanded. "If you move you're dead!"

Nick did as he was told and then moved back a step as the gunman descended, motioning with his weapon. He was a burly young man with long blond hair, wearing jeans and a T-shirt stretched tight over his broad chest. Rod Seeker followed him. "Well, Velvet, how's the pest-control business?"

"I don't know. I'm not awake yet."

Gloria climbed out of the bunk, wrapping a sheet decorously around her. "What is it, Nicky?"

"Nothing. Mr. Seeker decided to join us for an early breakfast."

Rod Seeker grinned mirthlessly. "Keep them covered, Tommy. Shoot them if they move."

"How'd you find me?" Nick asked.

"Tommy here spotted you at the lunch counter with that Blue Flame bunch. He thought it looked suspicious and he jotted down the license number of your car. The rental agency told me you were here at the marina."

Gloria was staring at Seeker and the gunman. "If you really want breakfast I could whip up some bacon and eggs."

"Just keep still," Tommy ordered, motioning with the gun.

"I don't know how you pulled that trick with the gypsy moths," Seeker continued, "but it was pretty clever. I didn't suspect a thing until I went in the house and noticed that you hadn't used the phone. There are buttons on the bottom for different lines I use for business and personal calls, and there's also an in-house intercom button when I want to talk to Tommy or someone in another room. That button was pressed down, just as I'd left it. You couldn't have made an outside call without pressing one of the other buttons. Later I described you to Tommy and he reported seeing you with that trouble-making girl and her group."

Nick merely smiled. "It looks as if I wasn't as smart as I thought I was."

"What did you take from my house yesterday? Or what did you leave there?"

"Leave there?"

"A bomb, a bug, a telephone tap."

"If it was a bomb you'd have heard it by now. And I'm not in the bugging business."

"What business are you in, Velvet?" Seeker was growing impa-

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tient. "And who hired you to break into my house? That girl? You're working with her, aren't you?"

Nick said nothing.

"What was she after in my house? What was there that you could remove in a minute's time?"

Gloria interrupted again. "You can talk all morning if you want, but I'm making breakfast."

Tommy took a step forward but Seeker put a restraining hand on his arm. "Let her do it. Just keep an eye on her."

Tommy moved to a point where he had a view of the galley and Nick suggested that he and Seeker sit down. "Might as well talk this over like civilized people," he said.

"What's your connection with the girl?" Seeker asked.

"I met her a couple of days ago. She told me you owed her a big chunk of money from the fire."

"I don't owe her a thing. She and her buddies are trying to con the insurance company, but that doesn't concern me. I'm clean on that fire."

Nick could hear the coffee perking in the galley, and Gloria called out to him, "How do you want your eggs, Nicky? Fried or scrambled?"

"Scrambled is fine." Nick tensed and leaned forward on his seat. He never had eggs for breakfast.

"If you're messed up with Lisa Mulcahy and her two buddies—"

"Two?" Nick repeated.

Suddenly there was a scream from Tommy as Gloria tossed the hot butter from the frying pan into his face. Nick launched himself forward, toppling Seeker onto the deck. It was all over in seconds.

"I've got the gun," Gloria announced with a touch of pride.

"Good! Use it if you have to."

Nick was seated on Rod Seeker's chest, ignoring the man's struggles and curses. Finally Seeker calmed down enough to ask, "What now? Will you call the police?"

"I just might." He glanced over his shoulder and saw Gloria wiping the gunman's face while she kept the revolver pressed against his head. He wore an expression of total terror and didn't look as if he'd be trying a counterattack.

"That girl Lisa conned you!" Seeker raged. "Whatever she told you about me is a pack of lies! They're pulling a shakedown!"

"Maybe. We'll see."

"She's trying to blackmail me!"

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Gloria had finished treating Tommy's face. "What'll we do with them, Nicky?"

"Get some rope and we'll tie them up. I'd like to keep them here till we find out who's telling the truth."

They left the two tied and gagged aboard the yacht and went ashore to locate Lisa and the others. But first Nick was looking for something—a local newspaper for the week of the fire at the Magellan. They tried the library first but it wasn't open that early in the morning. There was better luck at the newspaper office, where Nick found an account of the fire that hinted strongly at arson.

"What are you looking for now?" Gloria asked as he turned to the entertainment advertising in the previous day's edition, before the fire.

"I want to see the ad for Blue Flame. Lisa said she had three others in the group, but Seeker only mentioned two."

"Don't you think that Ken fellow is real?"

He pointed a finger at the display ad. "No, Ken's real enough. Here's his picture, along with Lisa and Mousey. It looks as if Jaeger's the one who's unreal."

"Maybe they just hired him."

"Why would they, when they have no equipment? Besides, he certainly seemed to know about Seeker and the fire."

"Maybe we should just forget about it, Nicky. We could go back to the boat and untie them."

But he shook his head. "I've still got my fee coming to me. I'd like to have a shot at getting it, one way or another."

They were leaving the newspaper office when Nick spotted the battered pickup truck driving by. "That's Mousey! Come on!"

Mousey heard them yell and pulled over to the curb. "Oh, hi. You're up and around early."

"So are you," Nick observed. "Where are the others?"

"Lisa's still in bed at the motel and I'm on my way to meet Ken. He's coming in on the train from Boston with a new amplifier."

"What about Jaeger?"

Mousey shifted uneasily. "I don't know. He's around somewhere."

"Does he play guitar too?"

"Yeah, guitar."

Nick was losing his patience. "Let's quit kidding around, Mousey. I saw the ads for Blue Flame. I know Jaeger isn't one of the group. Who is he?"

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The little man wet his lips and glanced around as if looking for a way out. His hands were tight on the steering wheel, but Nick had taken a firm grip on his arm. "Who is he?" Nick repeated.

"Cop," Mousey said, barely breathing the word.

Nick yanked open the door of the truck and shoved Mousey away from the wheel. "We're driving to the motel to get Lisa. Then we'll see about Jaeger."

"What's with you?" the little man grumbled. "I'm on my way to the station."

"That can wait." He called out to Gloria to follow them in the car and then got directions to the motel from Mousey.

It was only a little after eight when they reached Lisa's room, and she quickly threw a robe over her short pajamas when she saw them entering behind Mousey. "What is this?" she asked Nick. "A little early to come calling, isn't it?"

"Pick up the phone and get your friend Jaeger over here."

"What?"

"You heard me. I know he's a cop."

She did as she was told and they sat down to wait. Once Lisa started to speak. "We weren't conning you. We just needed to get the evidence against Seeker."

"We'll talk about it when Jaeger gets here."

Gloria motioned Nick aside. "If he's a cop, do you think you're doing the wisest thing inviting him over for a talk?"

"If he'd wanted to arrest me he'd have done it yesterday."

Jaeger arrived before nine, wearing the same T-shirt and jeans he'd had on the previous day. He looked around the motel room at their impassive faces and asked, "What's up?"

"You're a cop," Nick said. "That's what's up."

"Sure," he answered, unfazed. "Arson squad. I thought you knew."

"You knew damn well I didn't know!" Nick growled. "It was you who recognized me, wasn't it? You and not Lisa. You put her up to asking me for help."

"Nick Velvet's pretty well known in the northeast," Jaeger admitted. "I figured if I could use you to crack my case I should go ahead. After all, I'm not on the robbery squad."

"He saw you in that store," Lisa confirmed.

"Then you never meant to pay me anything."

"You'll get your reward when Seeker is brought to trial."

"You're going to convict him with that sliver of soap?" Nick asked. "I got to thinking about your story and it's full of holes. The fact

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that Seeker had some of the hotel soap at his home proves nothing. He might have taken some bars home as samples. He might have decided he didn't like the color or the scent for his supper club. You'd never even get an indictment for arson on that evidence."

"We weren't completely frank with you," Jaeger admitted. "I wasn't sure you could be trusted not to blab it all to Seeker. The truth is we already have proof of arson. The fire was started by a type of chemical bomb using water and sodium that are separated by a soap plug. After a time the water dissolves the soap and ignites the sodium, setting fire to the container. No gasoline, no explosives as such, no metal parts, no clock or other mechanical timer, nothing electric. Luckily for us, the arsonist used two bombs to be certain his scheme would work, and Mousey here found the second one before it went off. Tell him about it, Mousey."

"Well, it was the night of the fire and Lisa and Ken had already left. I stayed behind to pack up the equipment and I noticed Seeker come back to the dressing-room area just off the kitchen. He was carrying two wooden boxes about the size of milk cartons. He put one under some papers in a rubbish barrel and then took the other someplace else. Naturally I was curious, so I took the box out of the rubbish to examine it. Hell, I didn't know then that it was a bomb or I wouldn't have gone near it!"

"By tipping it upside-down Mousey temporarily defused it," Jaeger explained. "The water was no longer in contact with the soap plug and the thing was harmless."

"Anyway," Mousey continued, "as I was leaving the place about twenty minutes later a fire broke out in the kitchen. It suddenly dawned on me what that wooden box was, and I ran back in to get it from where I'd left it with our stuff. I called the fire department, but that old building went up like tinder. We lost everything."

"Except the other bomb," Jaeger pointed out. "We had Mousey's testimony as a witness, but with Seeker claiming he was in Boston at the time we needed something more. We needed to tie one or more of the bomb components to Seeker himself."

"The soap," Nick said, beginning to see it all.

"Exactly. There was no chance of tracing the sodium, but the soap plug had been carved from a traceable bar. The color and scent were both a little unusual and I thought we could match them. All the soap at the club was destroyed in the fire, but Lisa here happened to mention seeing the same soap in Seeker's bathroom when she visited his house. Unfortunately he wouldn't let her back in so she

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could steal a sample. That's when I happened to spot you in that store the day before yesterday."

"And you had no intention of ever paying me."

"If you'll remember, the money was going to come from Seeker. But I'm not after money, I'm after a conviction. Just be thankful I don't run you in."

"I'm thankful," Nick said. "Come on, Gloria."

She paused at the door and asked, "What about Seeker? Have you arrested him yet?"

"I had to wait for the lab report on the sliver of soap. It came through last night and it matches. We're presenting the case to a grand jury this morning."

"Is there a reward for Seeker?"

He smiled weakly. "No reward. We know where to find Mr. Seeker when the time comes."

On the way back to the boat Gloria said, "Well, I tried. It looks as if that was a free job."

"Don't be too sure," Nick said.

They were five miles out into Buzzards Bay before Nick told Gloria to release Rod Seeker and Tommy. "Where in hell are you taking us?" Seeker demanded as she removed the gag.

"Away," Nick said. "Unless you want to go back there to face arson charges."

"They don't have anything on me!"

"They've got a bar of soap from your house that matches a soap plug used in a fire bomb. And they've got a witness."

"I was in Boston!" he insisted. Then, "Are you turning me in?"

"Not if the price is right. I don't ferry passengers for my health. I'll drop you on Long Island or I'll drop you in the ocean. The choice is yours."

"How does ten grand sound?" Seeker asked, moistening his lips with a nervous tongue.

"Twenty-five sounds better."

"Twenty-five!"

"That's my price. For twenty-five thousand I'll get you out of the state and guarantee you safe from extradition."

"How can you do that?"

"Let me worry about it."

Gloria freed Tommy while they talked and he rubbed his wrists as he said, "Maybe you should do it."

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Seeker sighed and looked at Velvet. "Paying any amount is the lesser of two evils, I guess. Do you have a blank check?"

"Right here. And we can find a bank on Long Island that'll cash it before you leave our company."

They managed to reach a branch bank near the tip of Long Island shortly before closing time. After a phone call to the New York City office the check was approved. Seeker and Tommy set off on foot for the nearest Long Island Railroad station, and Nick went in search of a telephone.

He reached Jaeger quickly at Police Headquarters across the Sound. "This is Nick Velvet, Jaeger. Listen closely because I'm doing you a favor. Has the Grand Jury returned an indictment against Seeker yet?"

"They're still hearing evidence but we hope to get it today."

"Maybe you should reconsider. That story Mousey told about the bomb this morning doesn't hold water, to say nothing of sodium. Consider these three points: first, would Seeker risk placing the bombs himself when he's got that bodyguard Tommy to do all sorts of dirty work for him? Second, would Seeker set the bomb to dissolve the soap and go off in twenty minutes if he was trying to establish an alibi in Boston, at least an hour's drive away? Third, when the fire broke out, would Mousey have run back in to grab this mysterious box and let thousands of dollars' worth of their valuable equipment burn up? Remember, he said he put the box with their stuff."

"I suppose you've got a point," Jaeger admitted.

"Three points. That soap sample only proves the arsonist had access to the club's soap. But Mousey certainly did, working at the place. He stole the group's equipment and set the fire to cover the theft. Check some music stores in Boston and you'll probably find where he sold it."

"All right," Jaeger answered grimly. "I'll do just that. Thanks, Velvet."

"Don't mention it." He hung up and went outside to join Gloria. He was beginning to feel better about the whole thing.

"Q"

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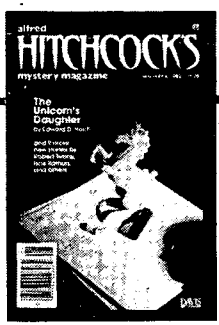

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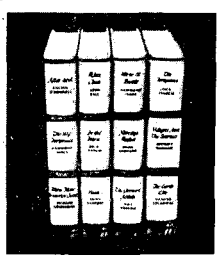

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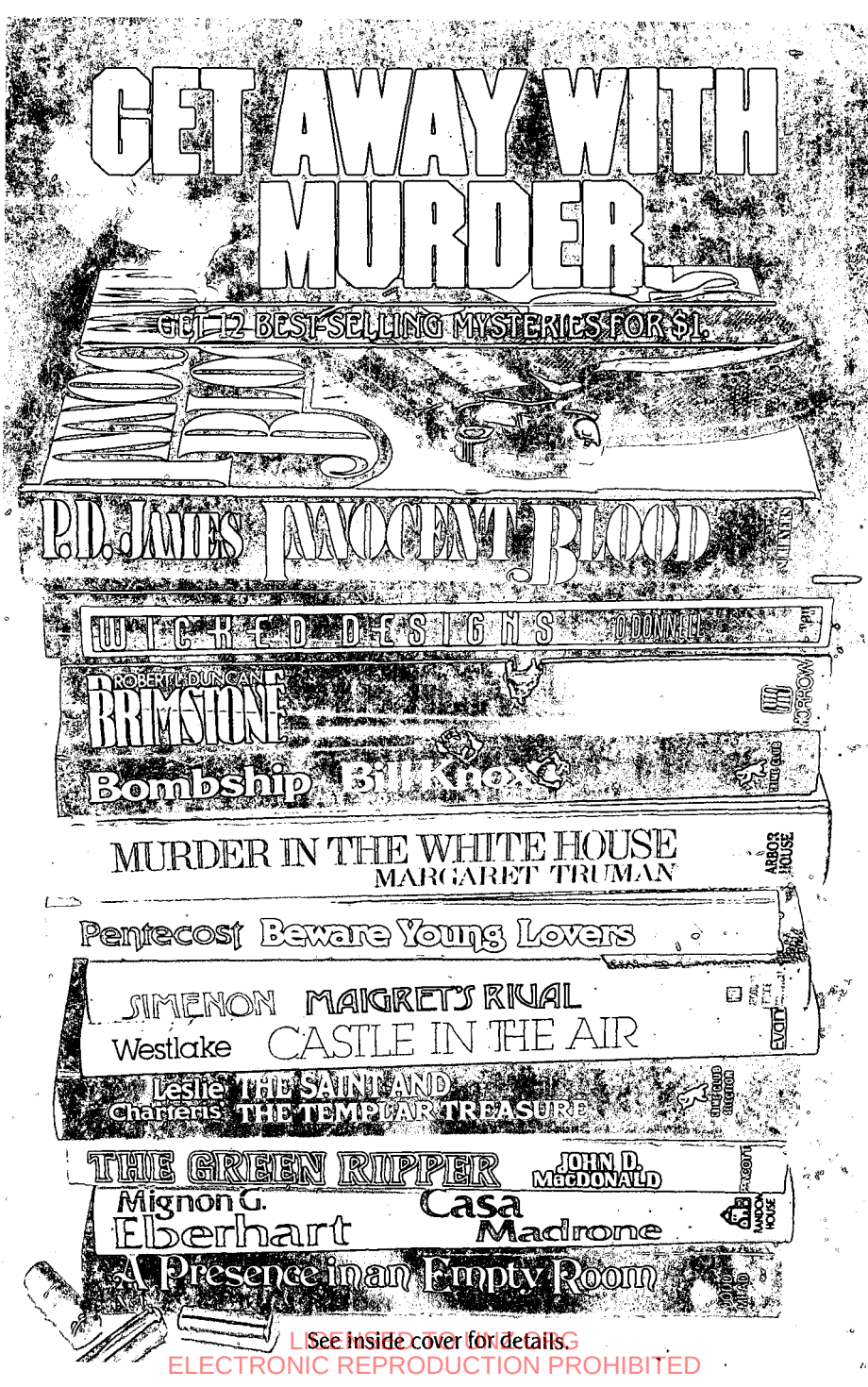

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